

**Thursday  
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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 16 November 2017**

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 16 November 2017*

*The House met at half-past Nine o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

**Mr Speaker:** On today's Order Paper it is noted that on 18 November 1917, Captain The Hon. Neil James Archibald Primrose, PC, MC, Royal Bucks Hussars, Member for Wisbech, died from wounds received in action at the Third Battle of Gaza, Palestine. We remember him today.

## Oral Answers to Questions

### DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

*The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport was asked—*

#### Superfast Broadband

1. **Ross Thomson** (Aberdeen South) (Con): What recent progress her Department has made on reaching the Government's superfast broadband target for the end of 2017. [901877]

14. **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What recent progress her Department has made on reaching the Government's superfast broadband target for the end of 2017. [901894]

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley):** Thank you, Mr Speaker; the length of the name of the Department now makes it sound like a land grab.

Over 94% of UK homes and businesses can now access superfast broadband and we are on track to reach 95% by the end of the year. Superfast broadband coverage will extend beyond that to at least another 2% of premises. For those not covered by superfast broadband, we will ensure universal broadband coverage of at least 10 megabits.

**Ross Thomson:** I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, and I am delighted that Aberdeen is one of six pilot areas for superfast reliable full-fibre broadband, which can offer speeds as high as 1 gigabit. However, at a time when the Scottish Government's slow roll-out of superfast broadband has left my constituency with one of the worst broadband speeds in the UK for an urban constituency—as well as the city being Europe's energy capital—does the Secretary of State share my belief that this UK Government investment is vital to boosting connectivity in Aberdeen?

**Karen Bradley:** I am disappointed to hear about the superfast coverage in my hon. Friend's constituency, because this Government have put the resources behind the superfast programme, but we are obviously reliant on local authorities, and, in the case of Scotland, the Scottish Government, to deliver the superfast programme. But we have always said that superfast gives good connectivity to as many people as possible as quickly as possible, but full fibre is the future, and the fact that Aberdeen is in the pilot is good news for his constituents.

**Alex Burghart:** I am grateful to the Secretary of State for her answer. People and businesses in my constituency are hungry for full-fibre broadband; when will they get it?

**Karen Bradley:** We are determined to make sure that all businesses and people living in my hon. Friend's constituency are able to access the broadband speeds they need to ensure they can be part of the digital revolution in our economy. I assure my hon. Friend that we will deliver full fibre to his constituency as soon as practicable.

**Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): Virgin Media has recognised that Wrexham is a great place to invest and is building new infrastructure in Wrexham. What can the Secretary of State do to help all the Conservative Members who ceaselessly complain about this Government's performance on superfast broadband, and ensure they have the benefits that Wrexham is now having?

**Karen Bradley:** It is a shame that the hon. Gentleman takes that approach. In 2012 only 2% of premises in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), for example, had access to superfast broadband, but the figure is now 94%, thanks to the actions of this Government. We know that we need to continue working on this, because it is important that we get the right access for people, and I am delighted to hear that the hon. Gentleman's constituency has such good broadband access.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): Ceredigion has the dubious accolade of being in the bottom 10 UK constituencies for broadband provision. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Welsh Government to ensure that Wales, and in particular its rural areas, are not left behind and lose out on superfast broadband?

**Karen Bradley:** My Department speaks regularly to the Welsh Government, who, as with the Scottish Government in Scotland, have responsibility for delivering superfast broadband across Wales. They will have heard the hon. Gentleman's comments, and I am sure they will act upon them.

**Mrs Kemi Badenoch** (Saffron Walden) (Con): I am pleased to hear the Secretary of State talk about superfast broadband coverage. Superfast Essex will provide coverage for 95% of the county, but what is being done to provide access to the 5% of residents in Essex, many of whom live in rural areas in my constituency, who desperately require improved connectivity?

**Karen Bradley:** I am very pleased that Superfast Essex will reach 95%, and, as I said in my opening remarks, the superfast programme does not end at the end of 2017; we expect a further 2% of premises to be covered by superfast under the programme. I also urge my hon. Friend and her constituency neighbours in Essex to encourage take-up of superfast broadband, because, as people take up access to it, money then comes back into the system to connect even more premises to superfast broadband.

**Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State explain why the UK Government's contribution to the Scottish Government's broadband roll-out project is just £21 million, an amount less than that awarded to Devon and Somerset? Will she join me in applauding the scale of the Scottish Government's ambition to achieve 30 megabits per second for every Scottish household? Does she not think that the people of England deserve that level of ambition from their Government?

**Karen Bradley:** This is about delivery of superfast broadband, not just ambition, and I am afraid that the Scottish Government are behind on every single measure compared with other areas—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman talks about money, money, money but the important point is that this is about delivery. Other local authorities and areas have been able to deliver, and I hope that the Scottish Government will take note.

#### Creative Industries: Careers

2. **Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to improve access to careers in the creative industries. [901878]

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley):** We are collaborating closely with industry to develop a sector deal for the creative industries. This includes considering how Government and industry can partner to strengthen the pipeline talent to the sector. Following the independent review of the sector by Sir Peter Bazalgette, we are working with the Creative Industries Council and the Creative Industries Federation and discussing measures including ways of improving information about careers in the creative industries and tackling barriers to working in the sector.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** I have visited a number of excellent apprenticeship schemes across the broadcast media, and apprentices often tell me that they have had to seek out information about apprenticeships themselves rather than receiving it from schools or careers advisers. What can we do to better promote the value of apprenticeships among our young people?

**Karen Bradley:** I completely agree that apprenticeships are a fantastic thing, and it is a great achievement of this Government that so many more young people are taking them up. They are a fantastic way of getting the skills and training they need for their careers. There are specific issues with regard to apprenticeships in the creative industries, particularly as a result of there being so many freelancers in those industries, but I know that the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, my right

hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Anne Milton), attended a roundtable of the creative industries earlier this week to discuss how exactly we can make this work so that all young people can benefit from apprenticeships.

**Julian Knight** (Solihull) (Con): Nurturing diversity is key to our vibrant creative industries, and access to those industries. Will the Minister join me in urging the new chief executive of Channel 4, Alex Mahon, to adopt a different approach from that of her predecessor by putting diversity and access to the industry at the top of her wish list as she considers relocation to the likes of Birmingham and Solihull?

**Karen Bradley:** I think we have a question on Channel 4's location later. Channel 4 has done incredibly great work when it comes to diversity. Its on-screen talent includes people with disabilities, people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds and people of different sexualities. It has been very good at promoting diversity, and I want to pay tribute to it for the work that it has done. Across the industry as a whole, more diversity would mean more creativity, and that is a message that the whole industry must listen to—and that diversity may possibly be located outside London.

**John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): In order to progress their careers, creative artists need lots of work opportunities. For musicians, that means venues, many of which are now being closed. Will the Secretary of State give serious consideration to embedding the agent of change principle into legislation, as I hope to propose in a ten-minute rule Bill in the near future?

**Karen Bradley:** We are aware of those concerns and we are working with the Department for Communities and Local Government to look at the proposition that has been put forward.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the best way to promote careers in the creative industries is on the back of a strong economy and having sensible economic policies to drive our country forward?

**Karen Bradley:** I could not have put it better than my hon. Friend has done.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): Of course, the people with the greatest interest in careers in the creative industries are the workforce. In those industries, those people are often rights holders as well as workers, so why are the Government continuing to deny membership of the Creative Industries Council to the trade unions? Will the Secretary of State make a pledge now to rectify that glaring omission immediately?

**Karen Bradley:** Membership of the Creative Industries Council is determined by the membership of the council. It is not a Government decision. The hon. Gentleman will be aware, if he has been speaking to the council, that because of the sector deal, any decisions about future membership have been deferred until the deal has been finalised.

### Rural Broadband

3. **Adam Afriyie** (Windsor) (Con): What steps she is taking to improve broadband speeds in rural areas. [901879]

**The Minister for Digital (Matt Hancock)**: As we have heard, superfast broadband is now available to more than 94% of premises. In 2010, only 42.5% of homes in Windsor had superfast broadband access. Today, that number is just shy of 94%.

**Adam Afriyie**: Windsor is a well-connected constituency—particularly given one notable resident—but we do have concerns that some rural and semi-rural areas may need further connectivity. In order to boost the creative, home education and home entertainment markets, does my right hon. Friend agree that developers and local authorities would do well to push on with ensuring that they deliver broadband infrastructure, such as ducting alongside the mains?

**Matt Hancock**: Windsor is not only well connected, but well represented. My hon. Friend's point is that it is important that new developments get infrastructure and connectivity right from the start. We have agreed with the Home Builders Federation and major broadband providers that all new large developments of over 30 homes will get good connections, but we are also talking to the Department for Communities and Local Government to strengthen that requirement, because it is pretty absurd to build a new house without the ducting to take fibre all the way to it.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I wrote to the Treasury about its £200 million locally led infrastructure fund, but I was passed to the Minister, who passed me to the local authority. The local authority says that the criteria mean that people have to make bids that are too big for a rural area. Will the Minister please look again at that so that my constituents in Teesdale can get the broadband they need?

**Matt Hancock**: As it happens, I was in Teesside last week talking to local authorities from across the region. We designed the scheme to allow all local bodies of whatever size to bid—district and borough councils, county councils and larger metropolitan areas—so I look forward to engaging with the hon. Lady to ensure that that can be taken forward.

**Richard Benyon** (Newbury) (Con): May I suggest that my right hon. Friend comes to the other end of Berkshire to look at what West Berkshire Council has done to try to get to the hardest to reach, particularly in rural areas? Only a fraction of the 72,480 homes do not have superfast broadband or will not have it in the next months. Instead of BT, the council is working with Gigaclear, which is a really effective delivery company.

**Matt Hancock**: West Berkshire is also extremely well represented, and testament to that is the fact that so much progress has been made on superfast broadband. I love the fact that there are now more and more different providers—not just Openreach and Virgin, but Gigaclear, Hyperoptic and others—that are working to get Britain connected.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I understand that the UK Government are likely to be taking up BT's offer of a 10-megabits universal service obligation for the remaining 5% of premises, which is far behind the Scottish Government's commitment of 30 megabits for 100%, so concerns have been raised about how the two will align. Will the Minister tell us whether he intends to discuss that with the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy and Connectivity before reaching a decision? Will he take up the suggestion of a UK-wide working group?

**Matt Hancock**: Yes, I saw my Scottish counterpart last week, and I am going to Scotland in a fortnight to discuss the matter. The problem in Scotland is that we delegated the funding to the Scottish Government, who have contracted more slowly than any English county or the Welsh Government. They need to get on with it.

**Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Gigaclear is also coming into Devon and Somerset in competition with BT to deliver more superfast broadband. However, the percentage of hard-to-reach people is still big, so we really must concentrate on getting superfast broadband to them.

**Matt Hancock**: My hon. Friend is dead right. I pay tribute to the work that Devon County Council and Somerset County Council have done together to deliver into some very hard-to-reach rural areas. In contrast to the Scottish contracting, they have been getting contracts out the door in order to achieve connectivity as quickly as possible.

### Leaving the EU: Creative Industries

4. **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the creative industries. [901880]

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley)**: The creative industries are one of the UK's greatest success stories, contributing over £87 billion to the economy. We have been working with the creative industries to understand the impacts and opportunities presented by our decision to leave the EU.

**Afzal Khan**: The Secretary of State will understand that new technologies are fuelling economic growth in our country, and nowhere more so than in Manchester—home to the world's first computer and the new wonder-material graphene. Manchester is an international city that was built on the work of people from all countries, as exemplified today by an international student population of 20,000. What is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that Brexit does not create new borders that will separate a community that thrives when there are no physical, language or cultural barriers, just like-minded innovators?

**Karen Bradley**: I agree that Manchester is a fantastic, creative, innovative and diverse city. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will join me in welcoming, for example, the Factory project, in which £78 million is being spent on regenerating the old Granada studios into an amazing creative space and hub. He will also welcome the fact

that yesterday the Government announced a doubling of the number of tier 1 visas available for highly skilled—the brightest and best—creative and tech people. He will also join me in welcoming the fact that the success of Tech North, a Manchester success story, will now be expanded across the whole UK through Tech Nation.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that coming out of the European Union opens up great opportunities for the creative industries?

**Karen Bradley:** My hon. Friend is right. Clearly there are challenges, but there are great opportunities. These are global industries that have operated outside the 27 member states of the European Union forever. They are a great British success story, and I am determined to make that continue.

### Digital Infrastructure Investment

5. **Lucy Frazer** (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): What progress her Department has made on digital infrastructure investment for the next generation of mobile and broadband communications. [901881]

**The Minister for Digital (Matt Hancock):** As well as the current generation of technologies, we have provided more than £1 billion of funding to support the next generation of digital infrastructure, including investment in full-fibre networks and 5G testbeds, so that we are ready to ensure that we are ahead of the pack as 5G is developed.

**Lucy Frazer:** Given the number of companies in and around Cambridge that specialise in technological innovation, the growth of agritech in east Cambridgeshire and the rural nature of Cambridgeshire as a whole, does the Minister think that South East Cambridgeshire would be an excellent place to hold some of the 5G trials?

**Matt Hancock:** My hon. and learned Friend has been assiduous in putting the case for Cambridgeshire, because of the combination of amazing high-tech growth in Cambridge itself and its rural hinterland, as an area where we can really test these technologies. I look forward to working with her and with Connecting Cambridgeshire to see whether we can make that happen.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): As well as fibre and base stations, data is a key part of digital infrastructure. The Minister claims that his Data Protection Bill will put people in control of their own data, but it systematically strips various groups, including immigrants, of any control. What is he doing to ensure that people can actually control their own data?

**Matt Hancock:** I am slightly surprised by the question, because we have introduced the Data Protection Bill, which is currently in the other place, to give people much more control and consent over their data and to ensure that in the UK we have a system that supports the use of data in a modern way while strengthening privacy. No doubt we will have a debate when the Bill comes to this House, but it is great that the Bill has cross-party support.

**Colin Clark** (Gordon) (Con): Does the Minister agree that it is vital to invest in digital infrastructure if we are to raise productivity, particularly in rural areas like Gordon in northern Scotland?

**Matt Hancock:** Absolutely. Not only are we ensuring that we roll out the current generation of technology—we are pushing the Scottish Government to deliver on that—but for the next generation of technology we will deliver directly to local authorities in Scotland, rather than going through the Scottish Government, because we want to make sure that Scotland does not get left behind, as it has this time round.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister will be aware that some 63,000 premises in Northern Ireland cannot get a download speed of 10 megabits per second, and 94% of those premises are located in rural areas. Through our confidence and supply agreement with the Government, we secured an extra £150 million for broadband. Can the Minister indicate what discussions have taken place with the Assembly to ensure that the roll-out continues?

**Matt Hancock:** We have been putting a lot of work into trying to ensure that we get a faster roll-out in Northern Ireland, and I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to talk about the details. The passing of the Northern Ireland Budget Bill this week will help to deliver that, and it will help to ensure that we have the structures in place. I am determined to make sure that Northern Ireland continues to get connected.

### S4C

6. **Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with S4C on its future funding. [901883]

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley):** As the hon. Lady will know, Eurnyn Ogwen Williams' independent review of S4C is ongoing. It will consider a range of issues, including S4C's remit, governance and funding methods.

**Jo Stevens:** I thank the Secretary of State for that reply, but it is estimated that S4C is going to lose £9 million of funding over the next three years, so will she tell the House what guidance she has given to Eurnyn Ogwen Williams in conducting her review?

**Karen Bradley:** This is an independent review. I have asked Eurnyn Ogwen Williams to look at the issues of remit, governance and funding methods, and it is down to him, as an independent reviewer, to look at those matters.

**Anna McMorrin** (Cardiff North) (Lab): Welsh is Britain's oldest indigenous language and, as such, has great cultural, social and historic significance. Based in my constituency, S4C plays a huge role in providing constant opportunities for people to hear and learn Welsh. Will the Secretary of State commit to increasing S4C's funding to ensure S4C's digital content is adequately resourced for it to compete on an equal footing with other broadcasters?

**Karen Bradley:** I agree with the hon. Lady that S4C is a fantastic success story, one introduced by a Conservative Government in the 1980s and one that continues to promote the Welsh language in such a fantastic way. We have an independent review, and I am determined to support and deliver a fantastic S4C for the future, making sure it is fit for the 21st century.

#### Channel 4: Relocation

7. **Eleanor Smith** (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Channel 4 on relocating outside London. [901884]

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley):** The Government have made it clear that Channel 4 must have a major presence outside London. As a publicly owned broadcaster, it is essential that it reflects and provides for the country as a whole.

**Eleanor Smith:** The Secretary of State keeps saying that this has got to be ensured, but many of us have put bids in, particularly from the west midlands—I am from Wolverhampton so I would want Channel 4 to go there—and we still do not know. What will she do to ensure that any relocation of Channel 4 protects its ability to fund itself through advertising?

**Karen Bradley:** We are discussing with Channel 4 the appropriate way forward and what is appropriate for it to do. I make no comment on an appropriate place for it to relocate to. I have heard a number of bids just today. I suggest that right hon. and hon. Members contact the Channel 4 board to put their propositions forward. This is a decision for the board, but clearly if we cannot reach an agreement, we would need to legislate, and I welcome the fact that there is cross-party support for the private Member's Bill on this matter.

**Mr Richard Bacon** (South Norfolk) (Con): Given that Norwich University of the Arts produces many digital and creative graduates each year, does the Secretary of State agree, notwithstanding the fact that she is not going to make a public endorsement, that Channel 4 should carefully consider the merits of Norfolk for a new location when it moves outside London?

**Karen Bradley:** What we have found through this process, which is still ongoing, is the vast number of incredible creative locations that we have across the whole of the United Kingdom. I urge them all to continue to put forward their suggestions and proposals, not just for Channel 4 but for all other creative industries, because getting creative clusters and a centre of gravity in an area means that creativity can flourish.

**Mr Speaker:** There is no doubt at least one in every colleague's constituency.

#### Football: Policing Costs

8. **Louise Haigh** (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with the Home Secretary on the cost to police forces of policing football matches outside the stadium. [901886]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch):** My officials and I have regular conversations with the Home Office on matters relating to football and other sporting events, including counter-terrorism, security and policing matters.

**Louise Haigh:** I am very grateful for the Minister's response. The cost to the Met of policing premier league football last year was almost £7 million, but the clubs contributed only £360,000. Given that they draw in more than £240 million every match day, is it not high time that premier league clubs were paying their full share to overstretched police forces?

**Tracey Crouch:** Football clubs do make a significant contribution to policing costs for home matches, and the Premier League and the clubs themselves contributed more than £2.4 billion to the public finances. We have to recognise that there are parameters as to policing costs and where these can be recovered from. I know that recent High Court cases have determined that, based on existing legislation, the police are not entitled to charge for these special police services where they are deployed on public land. That court decision has implications for what the police can charge, but we work with both the Premier League and the clubs on a host of policing matters, and I am sure that will continue.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) is absolutely right on this issue, about which I have had meetings with the Home Secretary. I urge the Minister to go with the Home Secretary to meet the Premier League and the English Football League and ask them to make a voluntary contribution from the massive amounts of money they get from TV rights, before they redistribute it to the clubs. If they refuse to do so, the Government should legislate to make sure that police forces get a realistic amount for the cost of policing matches; otherwise, the money is taken away from neighbourhood policing in all our constituencies.

**Tracey Crouch:** As I said, the Premier League and the clubs contribute more than £2.4 billion to the public finances. We are aware of the continued increase in the cost of policing football matches and other sporting events, and we have ongoing discussions about that with all those involved.

#### Cyber Attacks

9. **David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to tackle cyber-attacks. [901888]

**The Minister for Digital (Matt Hancock):** Protecting the UK from cyber-attack is a tier 1 national securing issue. We are investing £1.9 billion in cyber-security, and this year we opened the National Cyber Security Centre to lead the nation's efforts.

**David Hanson:** The Prime Minister has been clear this week that the Russian authorities have been meddling in elections and using social media inappropriately. What extra steps is the Minister taking following those allegations, and has he raised them directly with the Russian authorities?

**Matt Hancock:** The Prime Minister has been clear—as she set out on Monday night, with more details provided by the National Cyber Security Centre on Tuesday—that we know what the Russians are doing and we are not going to let them get away with it.

**Damian Collins** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Does the Minister agree that companies such as Facebook and Twitter should respond to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee's request to supply any evidence of Russian-backed activity or fake news interfering with British politics to Parliament so that we can scrutinise it?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes. This is an incredibly important issue and the Select Committee is taking a lead to ensure that evidence is brought to light. We will of course investigate all the evidence we see and take action where appropriate.

**Liam Byrne** (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): There are now widespread reports of a wave of cyber-attacks, possibly backed by Russia, aimed at subverting our democracy. What conversations has the Minister had with social-media firms about the existence of evidence of Russian interference in the EU referendum and the general election?

**Matt Hancock:** We have discussions with social media companies on a whole range of issues, including this one, and we discuss the impact of social media on political campaigning around the world. Of course, we cannot solve an issue such as this without working with the social media companies, because they provide the platforms on which a lot of the communication occurs.

**Liam Byrne:** Well, that was a pretty high-level answer. If we are to stop the cyber-attacks on our democracy, it is important that the right agencies have the right powers. The Electoral Commission tells me that it does not have the power to investigate foreign spending in elections. Will the Minister assure us that the Government will co-operate fully with the Mueller inquiry into Russian cyber-attacks on democracy? Will he begin preparations now for an American-style honest ads Act, so that the right agencies have the right powers to stop these cyber-attacks in their tracks?

**Matt Hancock:** The right hon. Gentleman makes important points. At this stage we are considering all options and looking at all the evidence. We will say more when it is appropriate.

### Topical Questions

T1. [901857] **Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley):** Since the previous oral questions, my Department has made progress on a number of key priorities. We have set out the internet safety Green Paper, which is the first step towards making the UK the safest place to be online. This week, we launched the Mendoza review—the first review of the museum sector in 10 years—which will help England's museums to thrive and grow. We have continued to work to ensure

that the UK is a world leader in digital and technology. Just yesterday, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor welcomed some of the best and brightest to Downing Street to reaffirm the Government's commitment to the sector. Finally, my Department will be leading work across Government and with a range of people and organisations to develop a civil society strategy. We value the vital work that civil society contributes in a number of areas, and my hon. Friend the Minister for Civil Society has today made a written ministerial statement to inform the House of our intention to take that work forward.

**Mr Bone:** American football is very popular in this country, and growing more so. In fact, we have had four regular season National Football League games in London this year. It is rather like Arsenal playing one of their premier league games in New York. Next year, there will be two games at Wembley and two at the magnificent new Tottenham Hotspur ground. Will the Secretary of State tell the House what efforts are being made to attract a franchise to London?

**Karen Bradley:** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend who chairs the all-party group on American football. Mr Speaker, I am just contemplating what you would do if Arsenal were playing in New York and how you would manage to fit in going there and watching the match. It may be a bit of a challenge, but I am sure that you would enjoy it. I was at the Ravens v. Jaguars match at Wembley, and saw an amazing full house of people enjoying American football here in the United Kingdom. We want to continue to promote American football here, and discussions are ongoing about a full-time franchise.

**Dr Rosena Allin-Khan** (Tooting) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that the Football Association made its final settlement payment to Eniola Aluko recently after initially withholding it because she spoke out about the abuse she had suffered. It is in the public interest to know how many people are being paid to stay silent. Does the Minister know how many settlement payments of a similar nature have been made to individuals by the FA or professional clubs after allegations of abuse or discrimination?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch):** I am not aware of the answer to that question. I am sure that the FA is watching this exchange with some interest and that it will be in touch with the hon. Lady.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Robert Halfon—not here.

**Mr John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my concern about the decline of local newspapers and the consequences for local democracy? Will she welcome the launch by the BBC of the local news partnership, which will support the employment of local democracy reporters? Does she agree that, perhaps now, Google and Facebook, which also profit from local journalism, could support that initiative?

**Karen Bradley:** My right hon. Friend deserves great credit for the work that he did on the BBC charter, which included this local news initiative now being

carried out by the BBC. The idea that we might lose our local newspaper—the voice for local people—is of great concern to all Members of this House. I have regular discussions with the internet companies on precisely the point that he has raised.

T2. [901858] **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): At the same time as the UK Government have been slashing Scotland's budget, funding for the national lottery fell by 14% in the past financial year, leaving Creative Scotland having to consider 119 closures. Will the Minister implement a recovery plan to offset those further cuts in funding?

**Tracey Crouch:** It has been well reported that there has been a decline in the receipts of the national lottery, and it is something that we are looking at. However, we still expect returns to good causes of the national lottery to be in the region of £1.6 billion, much of which will be distributed across the nation, including the constituency of the hon. Gentleman.

**Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Following the statement by the Prime Minister on 17 June, the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport gave £1.5 million to Mind to support our emergency services. That was much appreciated. Will she look at increasing that funding going forward?

**Karen Bradley:** I will look closely at what my hon. Friend says. Perhaps we could have a discussion outside this Chamber.

T3. [901859] **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): With more than 430,000 people having a serious gambling addiction and a further 2 million people possibly developing one, can the Minister say exactly what the Government are doing to tackle this serious problem?

**Tracey Crouch:** Mr Speaker, you will recall that on 31 October I published the 12-week consultation into gambling. That consultation will finish in January. On the day, we had an urgent question in which many of these issues were raised. None the less, the Government take the issue very seriously, and we look forward to getting back all the responses from the public and other interested organisations to help shape our policies in the future.

**Amanda Milling** (Cannock Chase) (Con): Society lotteries provide invaluable funding for charities and local causes, but they could provide a lot more if the jackpot prize was increased. Will my right hon. Friend outline what plans there are to reform the society lottery sector and the timetable for doing so?

**Karen Bradley:** My hon. Friend makes a very important point about society lotteries. As Government, we of course want to ensure that we have one strong national lottery, but that does not mean that we cannot also have strong society lotteries. We are looking carefully at the role of society lotteries and we will make announcements in due course.

T4. [901860] **Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Today's Pro Bono Economics report shows that full-time volunteering would add up to £119 million per annum to the UK's economy. What plans does the

Minister have to respond to the recommendations of the youth full-time social action review?

**Tracey Crouch:** The Government established an independent review of full-time social action by young people, which is expected by the end of the year.

**Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The biggest concern of the tourism and hospitality sector is access to the labour force once we leave the EU. Will the Minister confirm that he has got this message, and will he update the House on what representations he is making to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union on the matter?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (John Glen):** My hon. Friend is a strong campaigner for the tourism industry. I have had numerous conversations with the tourism industry across the UK and I am having active conversations across Government. I look forward to progress being made on this important issue in the very near future.

T6. [901862] **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): In September, the NEC Group agreed to operate the Bradford Odeon as the largest mid-sized venue outside London. This could attract a further quarter of a million visitors to Bradford. Does the Minister agree that this shows a huge confidence in Bradford, and will he look at bridging the funding gap after the local authority has added extra funds? Will he also meet me to look at the restoration of this world-class site?

**Matt Hancock:** I shall be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman. I know about the exciting proposals. We are very strong supporters of music venues in Bradford and across the country. This gives me the opportunity to warmly welcome the decision of the Met to abolish form 696, which has done so much to prevent a diverse range of live music. Significant pressure was brought to bear and, thankfully, the Met has now taken that decision. That is in London, but I also want to work with the hon. Gentleman to deliver music venues in Bradford.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): The Minister responsible for tourism will be aware of the importance of the industry to Torbay. It may seem strange to say this in winter, but many people will soon be starting to think about their summer holidays. What work will he do to ensure that people think of coming to Britain's great coastline next summer when they book their holiday at Christmas 2017?

**John Glen:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Extending the season is a key priority for the tourism sector. I shall be down in the south-west very early in March to declare the season open early next year.

T7. [901863] **John Grogan** (Keighley) (Lab): Will Ministers look at the situation whereby the 2018 winter Olympics would in their entirety be a listed event, with the expectation that they would be shown on live free-to-air TV, as before, in their entirety? In fact, most of the live coverage will be on Discovery's Eurosport without, as yet, any reference to Ofcom.

**Matt Hancock:** The listed events regime is incredibly important to ensure that the nation's favourite sports are seen on public service broadcasting channels. We do

not have a proposal to change the listed events regime as it is working pretty well, but I will look into the specific details mentioned by the hon. Gentleman.

**Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): I am passionate about getting more women into sport, especially girls in the Eastleigh constituency and across the UK. This Government have done great work with the “This Girl Can” campaign. We must, though, ensure that everyone taking part in sport is properly protected. What is the Department doing to ensure appropriate safeguarding for all children participating in sport?

**Tracey Crouch:** Mr Speaker, I hope you will forgive me, but it is actually a year ago today that the former Crewe Alexandra player Andy Woodward reported historical allegations. He was incredibly brave to do so. As a consequence of his courage, he has ensured that the Government and other parts of the sporting sector have taken the issue incredibly seriously. I am pleased to announce that I have secured ministerial agreement with the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office to change laws on the position of trust to include sports coaches.

T8. [901864] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Fixed odds betting terminals generate social harm of a scale and nature that demands an immediate, bold and radical response. I know that the Government are consulting on the question of a maximum stake, but does the Minister understand that unless they accept the minimum stake at the bottom end of those being consulted on, this problem will simply not go away?

**Tracey Crouch:** It is a live consultation, and I encourage the right hon. Gentleman to submit his views to it.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): The Natural History Museum is embarking on the monumental task of digitising 800 million items, including a collection of dung beetles and flea beetles. These items could hold the keys to our future biodiversity, climate change and pollution problems, so they are very important. Does the Minister agree that this is the kind of project the Government should be supporting in conjunction with our global partners?

**John Glen:** I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The Government are indeed supporting that sort of work, and we have some internationally renowned institutions doing wonderful work. Digitisation is really important, and the University of Sheffield, for example, is working closely with the Natural History Museum to take advantage of some of the pioneering work it has already undertaken.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** I am sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues, but there is heavy pressure on time today in light of the Backbench Business Committee debates and the statements before them, so we must now move on.

#### ATTORNEY GENERAL

*The Attorney General was asked—*

##### **Terrorism Offences: Prosecution**

1. **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to improve the prosecution of terrorism offences. [901865]

4. **Colin Clark** (Gordon) (Con): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to improve the prosecution of terrorism offences. [901869]

**The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright):** The last financial year saw the highest number of terrorism-related arrests in any year since data collection began, and a 55% increase in trials from the previous year. The conviction rate in terrorism prosecutions remained at 86%. The team of specialist prosecutors within the Crown Prosecution Service counter-terrorism division has doubled in size and their skills have been enhanced through training and sharing best practice with partners.

**Alex Chalk:** Disclosure to the defence in terrorism trials, as in any other trials, of material that might be of assistance to the defence or that might undermine the prosecution is the touchstone of a fair trial. Yet, notwithstanding my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General’s guidelines, there are concerns about the inconsistent application of those requirements. What more can be done to ensure that this vital task is properly discharged?

**The Attorney General:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has considerable experience in prosecuting cases. He is right that disclosure is a huge challenge, and becoming an ever greater one, because of the volume of material that arises, particularly in terrorism cases. We need to make sure we understand fully how we deal with a large quantity particularly of electronic material and sift it effectively. Then we need to make sure that all those involved in the disclosure process—both police officers and prosecutors—understand their responsibilities fully.

**Colin Clark:** What measures are in place to prosecute those linked to the war in Syria?

**The Attorney General:** This is a matter of considerable public concern. He will know that many of the offences related to what is happening in Syria are offences of preparing to commit acts of terrorism. Over the 10 years from 2006 to 2016, 90 offenders were charged with these offences, 81 of whom received immediate custodial sentences at an average of eight years and five months’ imprisonment.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Bearing in mind that there was a 30% drop between June 2016 and June 2017 in convictions for terrorism-related offences, will the Minister outline how he has instructed the CPS to improve the conviction-arrest ratio?

**The Attorney General:** Across the United Kingdom, the volume of cases and convictions is going up all the time. It is important that we recognise that the volume of cases reflects a genuine problem—a problem not just of terrorist acts, but of those who encourage or glorify terrorism. We must make sure the law keeps pace with that in terms of substantive offences and the sentencing regime.

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): Following on from that answer, has the Attorney General seen the content published online yesterday by the Leave.EU campaign, in which a number of his hon. and right hon. colleagues

were denounced as traitors and as a cancer, simply because they disagreed with the views held by the billionaire owner of that company? Will the Government consider amending legislation so that such clear incitements to hatred can be prosecuted through the criminal courts?

**The Attorney General:** I agree that incitement to hatred is reprehensible, from wherever it comes and whatever subject it is based on, and it is important that the criminal law is available to deal with that conduct. The hon. Gentleman is right too—he has heard me say this before—that conduct online should be treated no less seriously than conduct offline. No one should imagine that they are immune from the criminal law if what they are doing is online instead of in what we might call the real world.

### Leaving the EU: Prosecution of Criminals

2. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that leaving the EU does not limit the UK's ability to prosecute criminals. [901866]

**The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright):** The Prime Minister has made it clear that the United Kingdom is committed to maintaining both the UK's and Europe's security now and after our withdrawal from the EU. We believe that the UK and the EU should work together to design new, dynamic arrangements as part of our future partnership, that would allow us to continue and to strengthen our close collaboration on security, law enforcement and criminal justice.

**Alex Cunningham:** Next year, London will host the Commonwealth summit, which is a real chance to build on what the Minister has just said—that commitment across different countries to build up capacity to prosecute criminals. Can the Attorney General assure the House that every effort will be made to build the widest possible coalition to tackle crime, which knows no borders?

**The Attorney General:** Yes, I can give the hon. Gentleman that reassurance, and he is absolutely right that such offences are best dealt with transnationally, because they are committed transnationally. He will recognise that outside the European Union we have a number of different relationships with many other countries to enable us to do law enforcement more effectively and of course bring prosecutions more effectively too.

**Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Justice Committee, in its report in the previous Parliament on the legal implications of Brexit, referred to a number of practical measures that need to be taken to maintain criminal justice co-operation. Can the Attorney General help us on what progress has been made on those, and in particular what steps are being taken to ensure that we have continuing data regulation alignment after we leave?

**The Attorney General:** Yes. My hon. Friend is right that data is crucial to this, and he will recognise that two things need to be done simultaneously. We need to aspire to the closest possible co-operation in law enforcement and security with our European friends after our departure from the EU. We also, of course, need to prepare for

what I think is the unlikely possibility that we will not have an ongoing relationship, and there may be a need to fall back on other things. But as I say, I think that is an unlikely possibility, and I think it is very important that we have the closest possible co-operation, which of course is in the interests not just of the UK but of the EU.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): It is vital that we maintain the advantages of our current prosecution toolbox when we leave the EU.

May I press the Attorney General on the allegations that exist of widespread international money laundering against the President of South Africa and the Gupta family, which is stripping money from South Africa and leaving that country as a captured state? Can the Attorney General assure me that our exit from the European Union will not hamper any investigation into those matters?

**The Attorney General:** As I said to the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), we should all recognise that crimes like money laundering do not stop at national borders and therefore they cannot be combated solely by one nation state, and they are not being. Our co-operation with other countries will continue, and I hope be enhanced, because I believe this kind of transnational offending is likely to increase, not decrease. The hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) would not expect me to comment on ongoing investigations in specific cases, but I can assure him that when it comes to money laundering, as with other types of offending, that transnational co-operation will continue.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** I am grateful for that answer. Of course, I would not expect specific points on a specific case, but is the Attorney General aware that there are now further allegations against the Gupta family about a financial kickback from China South Rail that originates from the South African state enterprise Transnet? Can he assure me that if necessary the National Crime Agency, the Serious Fraud Office and the Financial Conduct Authority will undertake appropriate investigation of this matter?

**The Attorney General:** Yes. As the hon. Gentleman will readily recognise, one of the challenges in cases like this is to determine the appropriate jurisdiction, because many other law enforcement agencies in many other countries may well have an interest, but we do try and do that, and we are generally successful in reaching what I think are sensible settlements on who does what. He can rest assured that under this Government, offending of the type he has described will be properly pursued, wherever it takes place and whoever is responsible.

### Sentencing

3. **Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the unduly lenient sentence scheme. [901867]

11. **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the unduly lenient sentence scheme. [901876]

**The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland):** The number of sentences considered by the Attorney General and me has more than doubled since 2010, from 342 to 837 requests last year. We took 190 of those cases to the Court of Appeal in 2016, and the Court agreed to increase the sentences of 141 offenders.

**Mims Davies:** Controlling behaviour is mentioned in my constituency surgeries and the new law in this area is welcomed. Constituents have also welcomed the Court of Appeal's increase of the sentence imposed on an offender engaged in serious incidents of violence and controlling behaviour against his partner. The offender is now spending an extra three years in prison, following the Attorney General's referral of the case through the unduly lenient sentence scheme. Will my hon. and learned Friend please outline what steps he is continuing to take to increase public awareness of the unduly lenient sentence scheme?

**The Solicitor General:** Indeed. We use every type of media, including social media, to raise awareness. We also use local radio interviews and I personally conduct a number of cases in the Court of Appeal on behalf of the Government. The results show an increase in the number of referrals.

**Andrew Bridgen:** A number of my constituents are concerned at what they see as unduly lenient sentences handed down to some people who have been convicted of causing death by dangerous driving. Will my hon. and learned Friend confirm how many such sentences have been reviewed and increased?

**The Solicitor General:** The offences of causing death by dangerous driving and causing death by careless driving under the influence of drink and drugs are in the regime, and since the beginning of 2015 eight cases of that nature have been referred to the Court of Appeal, five sentences have been increased and one is currently pending, even today.

### Pro Bono Work

5. **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps he has taken to encourage pro bono work in the last 12 months. [901870]

**The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland):** As pro bono champions in the Government, the Attorney General and I chair the pro bono panel and committee to bring together the most important players to steer and co-ordinate the overall work. As Members will be aware, last week was the 16th national pro bono week, and the Attorney General and I attended and supported events up and down the country to encourage and support the excellent work being done.

**Nigel Huddleston:** I am sure that, like me, many colleagues receive requests from constituents who are not wealthy and come to our offices with complex legal issues, although our offices are not capable of dealing with them. How can we ensure that people in desperate need get help, either through legal aid or a much enhanced pro bono scheme?

**The Solicitor General:** I am sure that my hon. Friend and many other colleagues will use the services of the Bar pro bono scheme and, indeed, the LawWorks scheme, which can assist in individual cases. The Government are reviewing the operation of the legal aid regime, and we are going to work with expert advisory panels to find the most effective ways to provide that essential early advice and support for people in need.

### Rape and Sexual Offences: Prosecutions

6. **Jo Platt** (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with the Director of Public Prosecutions on ensuring more effective prosecutions of cases involving rape and other sexual offences. [901871]

**The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright):** I have frequent discussions with the Director of Public Prosecutions on a range of issues, including cases of rape and other sexual offences. May I take this opportunity to update the House on one aspect of trials of this kind of offending?

Earlier this year, the then Justice Secretary and I asked the Crown Prosecution Service to review a sample of case files to ascertain the frequency of applications to introduce evidence relating to the previous sexual history of a complainant, under section 41 of the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999. Section 41 provides for a presumption against the inclusion of evidence based on previous sexual history, but allows that evidence to be heard only in restricted circumstances. I am grateful to the Director of Public Prosecutions for her findings, which show that in only 13% of the cases looked at was an application under section 41 made, and that in just 8% of those cases was an application granted by the judge. That indicates that the overwhelming majority of rape cases see no evidence submitted of a complainant's previous sexual history, but the Government are looking carefully at the detailed findings to assess the operation of the law in practice, and we will set out our conclusions shortly.

**Jo Platt:** I welcome the Attorney General's comments, but does he accept that low conviction rates for rape and sexual offences can deter victims from reporting those incidents to the police—an issue that was recently brought to my attention by a constituent? If so, will he work with the Director of Public Prosecutions to improve confidence in our ability to prosecute such cases and ensure that victims are able to come forward?

**The Attorney General:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady, and the answer to her last question is certainly yes—that is what we are doing. She is right: there are a number of factors that might deter those who should come forward to report crimes of this nature from doing so, and of course deter them from pursuing those cases throughout trial. We must not only do what we can to ensure that conviction rates are where they should be, but make sure that complainants are properly supported throughout the case. We do that through independent sexual violence advisers and special measures. She will know that, in relation to vulnerable witnesses in particular, we are beginning to roll out pre-recorded cross-examination so that people can give their evidence outside a courtroom and get it done before the trial begins. All those things will help, but there is more to do.

**Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): The Attorney General has just touched on this, but does he agree that it will help more vulnerable people to come forward if they feel that they can have a pre-trial cross-examination?

**The Attorney General:** I agree with my hon. Friend. That is important for two reasons. First, as I have indicated, for those people it means that their part in the case can be over before the rest of the trial takes place, meaning that they are not subject to any delays from which the case may suffer. Secondly, they are of course giving evidence outside the courtroom, without having to confront the defendant in the case. It is of huge benefit and, as I have said, I look forward to its further roll-out.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): In his capacity as ex officio Advocate General for Northern Ireland, what advice has the Attorney General given to his colleagues in government about the implications of the Criminal Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 on cases of rape in Northern Ireland, with particular reference to the non-consensual sex exemption form?

**The Attorney General:** As the hon. Lady may anticipate, I obviously do not discuss the advice that I have given within government. However, she can take it for granted that in relation to Northern Ireland, as in relation to all other parts of the United Kingdom, we take these offences extremely seriously, and we wish them to be prosecuted effectively.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Hannah Bardell.

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): Question 7, Mr Speaker.

**The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright):** With permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer this question along with Questions 8 and 9.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Question 9 has in fact been withdrawn. The Attorney General did not need to know that and clearly did not know that, which is no indictment of him, but it has been withdrawn.

### Leaving the EU: Human Rights

7. **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the protection of human rights in the UK. [901872]

8. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the protection of human rights in the UK. [901873]

**The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright):** The United Kingdom has a long tradition of ensuring that rights and liberties are protected domestically, and of fulfilling its international human rights obligations. The decision to leave the European Union does not change this.

**Hannah Bardell:** When the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill returns to this House, we will debate the EU charter of fundamental rights. Will the Government support

the codification of the charter into UK law following its departure from the EU, and will they support their own Back Benchers' amendments that have cross-party support?

**The Attorney General:** No. The reason is that the charter of fundamental rights, as the Labour Government indicated at the time, does not create any new rights. It incorporates rights that are already part of European Union law, and the Government's intention is to translate those substantive rights into domestic law by the operation of the withdrawal Act. We do not intend to incorporate the charter of fundamental rights into domestic law.

**Patrick Grady:** How will leaving the European Union protect and enhance our rights, under the European convention on human rights, to free and fair elections of the legislature? Given that the vast majority of legislators in this country are not elected—they are Members of the House of Lords—are the Government confident that they will be complying with their ECHR obligations both before and after Brexit?

**The Attorney General:** Yes, we are confident that we are compliant with our ECHR obligations. The hon. Gentleman enables me to point out that, as he knows, our ECHR obligations will remain after we have left the European Union.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): The UK has always been at the forefront of international human rights. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that we will continue such co-operation, not least, for example, under the auspices of the Council of Europe?

**The Attorney General:** I agree with my hon. Friend. I find it surprising that Members of this House have so little faith in their own institution. This House is perfectly capable of protecting the rights of the citizens of this country, and routinely does so. We do not need the assistance of the European Union to do it, and after we no longer have the assistance of the European Union, I am confident that this Parliament will continue to do it effectively.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): For many years, many people in this House seemed to think that human rights in this country started only with the Human Rights Act 1998, and they now seem to think that they started only with our membership of the European Union. Will the Attorney General confirm that our rights and freedoms in this country go back way beyond either of those points in our history, and will continue long into the future after they have both been replaced?

**The Attorney General:** The rest of the world is rightly jealous of this country's ability to protect human rights through a robust system of the rule of law, a fiercely independent judiciary, and an effective legal profession.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): May I press the Minister following the answer that he gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell)? Last week, in front of the Exiting the European Union Committee, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) stated that the Government believe that the Human Rights Act can be

relied on in place of the charter of fundamental rights. Does that mean that the Government are now fully committed to the retention of that Act beyond Brexit?

**The Attorney General:** I thought we had made clear that this country will remain a signatory to the European convention on human rights for the duration of this Parliament. The Under-Secretary of State was making the point that I made earlier: we are confident that the substantive rights that all Members of the House wish to continue to be protected, will remain protected in domestic law.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the Attorney General agree that it is an absolutely absurd proposition to suggest that if we come out of the EU we will deliberately in some way reduce human rights? That is an absolute nonsense, and it is a shame that the Opposition are peddling it.

**The Attorney General:** I agree on both counts.

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): The Attorney General does not seem to get the point. Our role in human rights in Europe has been to set the gold standard and to show an example. The Council of Europe has experienced recent cases of corruption, with a man called Luca Volontè who took a bribe. The chairmanship was by Azerbaijan—a corrupt country. Our role is not to protect our own human rights by being in Europe, but to set a standard that can be emulated by other countries that have very serious breaches of human rights.

**The Attorney General:** The hon. Gentleman may be in danger of confusing the European convention on human rights with the charter of fundamental rights. As I said, the Government he supported—the last Labour Government—made it clear that no new rights were created by the charter of fundamental rights. Therefore, taking away that charter cannot remove any rights, and the Government have no intention of doing so.

#### Online Abuse: Prosecution Rates

10. **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to increase prosecution rates for internet trolling and other forms of online abuse. [901875]

**The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland):** The number of prosecutions commenced under the Communications Act 2003 and the Malicious Communications Act 1988, which include many online offences, have increased by 68% in the past three years.

**Grahame Morris:** Latest figures show that the CPS successfully prosecuted 15,000 cases of hate crime in 2015-16. However, in the same year the number of cases referred to prosecutors by the police dropped by 10%. Can the Solicitor General explain why that should be?

**The Solicitor General:** The CPS is working with the police locally and nationally to understand the reasons for that. Anecdotally, it is believed that some police forces are using restorative justice or out-of-court disposals where they could have pursued prosecutions. Let me reassure the hon. Gentleman and make clear that it is unacceptable for any group or person to use the internet as a means to harass, intimidate or threaten individuals in an illegal manner online.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you. Oh no, we cannot stop now. We must hear Mr Hollobone.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Which CPS area is best at prosecuting online abuse cases, and how might its best practice be rolled out to other areas?

**The Solicitor General:** I do not have area-by-area figures, but I will endeavour to supply them to my hon. Friend. On hate crime, sentencing uplifts have increased, and they continue to do so, to 52.2% of cases last year—a rise from 33.8% in the previous year.

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): What can be done to strip away the anonymity of online trolls who make life such a misery for people online?

**The Solicitor General:** That issue is being considered as part of the code of practice that is being established, pursuant to the Digital Economy Act 2017. That code will set out guidance on what social media providers should do regarding conduct on their platforms, which includes the behaviour referred to by my hon. Friend. He also raised the important issue of anonymity, and the individuals who hide behind that and use it as a cloak for their illegal activities. The prosecution will always seek to pierce that cloak and prosecute those responsible.

## ROYAL ASSENT

**Mr Speaker:** I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Finance (No. 2) Act 2017

Air Travel Organisers' Licensing Act 2017

Northern Ireland Budget Act 2017

New Southgate Cemetery Act 2017.

I am sure that the Northern Ireland Budget Act 2017 will be of great interest in particular to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), when he has concluded his intense and, I am sure, extremely urgent conversation with the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane).

## Hormone Pregnancy Tests

10.40 am

**Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health to make a statement on the recently published "Report of the Commission on Human Medicines' Expert Working Group on Hormone Pregnancy Tests".

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine):** Yesterday, the Commission on Human Medicines published the report of its expert working group on hormone pregnancy tests. As I said at Health questions on Tuesday, this subject demands the utmost sensitivity and I will do my best.

Based on its extensive and thorough review, the group's overall finding, endorsed by the Commission on Human Medicines, is that the available scientific evidence, taking all aspects into consideration, does not support a casual association between the use of hormone pregnancy tests, such as Primodos during early pregnancy, and adverse outcomes of pregnancy with regard to either miscarriage, stillbirth or congenital abnormalities. Ministers have accepted the advice of the Commission on Human Medicines. A written ministerial statement was published yesterday, along with a copy of the report.

In the UK, hormone pregnancy tests first became available for diagnosing pregnancy in the 1950s. Between then and 1978, when Primodos was withdrawn from the market in the UK, a number of studies that investigated a possible link between women being given a hormone pregnancy test to diagnose pregnancy and the occurrence of a range of congenital anomalies in their babies was published. Although there was never any reliable evidence that HPTs were unsafe, concern about the issue, coupled with the development of better pregnancy tests, meant that a number of precautionary actions were taken to restrict the use of HPTs. The tests were voluntarily removed from the market by the manufacturers.

The body of information subsequently accrued by the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests and other campaigners led to a parliamentary debate in 2014, I think in Westminster Hall, during which the then Minister for life sciences, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), stated that he would instruct that all relevant documents held by the Department of Health be released. In addition, he determined that an independent review of the papers and all the available evidence was justified. The purpose of the review was to ascertain whether the totality of the available data, on balance, supported a casual association between use of a hormone pregnancy test by the mother and adverse pregnancy outcomes. It also considered whether, alternatively, the anomalies could have been due to chance alone, or other factors.

The final report summarises the scientific evidence that was considered by the expert working group, its conclusions on the evidence, and its recommendations. All the available relevant evidence on a possible association has been extensively and thoroughly reviewed with the benefit of up-to-date knowledge by experts from the relevant specialisms. The evidence reviewed by the expert working group will be published in the new year, once it has been rightly checked in line with the legal duties of data protection and confidentiality.

[Steve Brine]

In addition to the overall conclusion, the expert working group has made a number of recommendations to safeguard future generations through strengthening the systems in place for detecting, evaluating, managing and communicating safety concerns about the use of medicines in early pregnancy. I recognise that the conclusion of the report will be a disappointment to some, but I hope that they will see the recommendations as positive. They are a credit to the efforts of the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests and the all-party group on oral hormone pregnancy tests, which is chaired by the hon. Lady, and also a lasting legacy.

**Yasmin Qureshi:** I am so disappointed with the Minister's response. Clearly he is just reading what his staff and the Department have been telling him. I wish the Minister would actually go through the documents submitted to the inquiry and those documents that we had, because if he had read them, he would never have to come the Dispatch Box and said what he has said.

You will be aware, Mr Speaker, that I have raised this issue in Parliament on a number of occasions. In 2014, an expert working group was set up to look at a possible association—not a casual link or a causal link. I am sure that hon. Members agree that that means that a lesser burden of proof is required. The first thing that the commission did was to say that it had found no causal connection, but it was never asked to do that—it was asked to look for a possible association. In 2014, the then Minister made promises about statutory oversight. From the papers we had, there appeared to be a clear criminal responsibility regarding the statutory body, the Committee on the Safety of Medicines, and the people who ran it, given that so much evidence was adduced to them. They were alerted to the fact that Primodos was causing deformities and miscarriages in women, but they totally ignored that evidence. In fact, the person in charge actually said that he wanted to cover it up so that nobody could be sued. It is therefore highly surprising that the commission has come up with this recommendation.

The commission was shown evidence from many studies, the majority of which showed conclusively that when the drug was given to rabbits and rats—mammals, like ourselves—the tissues were damaged. There were—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am grateful to the hon. Lady, but I am afraid, although she is highlighting an immensely important matter, and one that she has highlighted before, she has not asked a question—[*Interruption.*] Order. She has reached her limit and that is it. I have told her, as I have other Members. I have lost count of the number of times Members have been told that if they have an urgent question, they can begin with a few observations—a sentence or two—in response to the Minister, and then questions must follow, but that is not what has happened. I have the highest respect for the hon. Gentleman's knowledge of and commitment to this subject, but she cannot speak for two minutes and then indicate, "I'm about to get to my questions." Sorry, I say to her—[*Interruption.*] Order. No, sorry, but you have had your time. It is up to Members to stick to the limits, so other colleagues will now have to pursue this matter. I genuinely thank her for what she has said,

but Members really must observe procedures. If I may say so, there has never been a more enthusiastic friend of the House than me in the granting of urgent questions, but Members must then follow the procedure. That is the situation. I call Anna Soubry.

**Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con):** Thank you, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I beg the right hon. Lady's pardon. First, let us hear the Minister respond to the statement made by the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi). It was an important statement; it just did not contain a question.

**Steve Brine:** You are, indeed, a friend of the House, Mr Speaker.

I have the utmost respect for the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), with whom I have served on Select Committees, and I will try to help her out. I have seen some of her public criticisms in the past 24 hours. I know that she has been very consistent about this, but I am not just reading notes put before me; I am citing evidence from an expert working group. It really would come to something if Members suddenly started to second-guess expert, scientific and medical evidence. I am not just quoting what is before me. The review's conclusions do not take away—I do not pretend for one minute that they do—from the very real suffering experienced by these families. This was a comprehensive, independent, scientific review of all the available evidence carried out by the best experts in a broad range of specialisms. Ministers are confident in the report and the review process, and the focus now must be on implementing the recommendations.

**Anna Soubry:** On Friday, two constituents came to my surgery to speak to me about exactly this. The mother had taken one of these pills and her daughter was born with deformities. This is not the Minister's report—he is just giving his explanation and doing his job—but may I suggest that we have a proper Back-Bench debate in which we can exercise all these issues? With great respect to the working group, and having had some experience as a former public health Minister and knowing about contaminated blood, I am afraid to say that I smell something like a very large rat in all of this. I think that there have been cover-ups.

**Steve Brine:** I thank my right hon. Friend—one of my predecessors in this role—for her question. I appreciate that she will have met constituents who have been affected by this in her surgeries and that that must have been very difficult. The report's conclusions do not detract from the suffering experienced by the families, and we recognise that the families may find those conclusions hard to accept. Birth defects occur naturally in up to four in every 100 babies, and the existence of a birth defect in a baby exposed to a medicine during pregnancy does not necessarily mean that it was caused by the medicine.

As for the question of any future parliamentary discussion of this subject, I suspect—in fact, I know—that my right hon. Friend is more than capable of seeking such opportunities.

**Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab):** This decision has rightly been met with disbelief by campaign groups. It has been called a whitewash,

an injustice and a betrayal. It is clear from the reaction to yesterday's report that real anger remains about the way in which the affected families have been treated. Have we learnt nothing from previous scandals and cover-ups? The chair of the campaign group, Marie Lyon, has said:

"I could go to prison if I divulge what was discussed."

Does the Minister not agree that that is as far away as possible from transparency? How can Marie Lyon or any of the other campaigners say that their views have been properly taken into account? Will the Minister tell us what conversations he has had with the affected families about the results of the report and what further action they want to take?

A draft of the report, which was published in October, stated

"Limitations of the methodology of the time and the relative scarcity of the evidence means it is not possible to reach a definitive conclusion."

However, that sentence was removed from the final version. It is critical that the Minister answers these questions: why was the sentence removed; why was there a delay of a month; and did he speak to the authors of the report about the sentence before its removal? The inquiry has answered a question that it was not asked to answer, and it has reached a conclusion not supported by the evidence. What is the Minister's view of the various studies that have been referred to that show a causal connection?

When he set up the inquiry, the previous Minister for life sciences, the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), said that he wanted to

"shed light on the issue and bring the all-important closure in an era of transparency". —[*Official Report*, 23 October 2014; Vol. 586, c. 1143.]

The reaction that we have seen will demonstrate to the current Minister that on that measure the inquiry has failed. Will he look again at holding a full, independent review, so that families can feel they have seen justice done and we can be sure that this will never happen again?

**Steve Brine:** The hon. Gentleman referred to a "whitewash". As I have said, this was a comprehensive, independent, scientific review of all available evidence by experts on a broad range of specialisms who, with respect, are far more qualified to consider the subject than either him or me. It was a rigorous, important and impartial review conducted over the best part of two years, and the experts were given access to all the available documents.

As for the families and issues relating to disclosure, yes, Mrs Lyon was on the panel. However, it is standard procedure for expert working groups to sign such an agreement, as all members of the panel did, in order to keep the process free from external influence and to prevent it from being constantly discussed in the media. The companies did meet the group and gave evidence to it. Having discussed the matter briefly with members of the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency this morning, I have to say that I think the families could have been treated a great deal better when they met the group. I thought that the layout of the room was intimidating. Not everyone is like a Minister or a Member of Parliament who can sit in front of a Select

Committee and know how to handle it. I think that the process could have been handled better, and I made that very clear.

As for Ministers and meetings, my noble Friend Lord O'Shaughnessy, who ultimately has responsibility for the MHRA and whom I "shadow" in the House of Commons, has met the all-party group and the families group. He will meet them again on 6 December, now that the report has been published. The APPG is also meeting the chair of the expert working group.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned other research. He might have been referring to Dr Vargesson, an Aberdeen-based researcher who is, I believe, working on the components of Primodos in fish. He was invited to give evidence to the group, and he did so, but he did not want to leave his work and the evidence, which he said would shortly be published, with the expert working group. As far I am aware, that work has still not been published, but I know that the MHRA will be keen to look at any new work that is published.

**Sir Mike Penning** (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I know the Minister very well. He is a passionate and caring Minister, but I am afraid that I disagree with many of the things he said this morning. The families do—I think, rightly—feel that the report is a whitewash. Material has been removed from the draft, and the group looked into matters that were not within its remit. The question of a causal link was not in its remit. The question was whether there was link with a drug that was often given to our constituents with no prescription: a drawer would be opened, and it would be handed out to them so that they could find out whether they were pregnant. An open inquiry was needed, but I am afraid that the families, and many Members who are present today, will not feel that that was what happened. Will the Minister please meet the families again, with members of the all-party group, and try to understand why they are so upset? Will the Minister please also watch last night's report on Sky News, which exposes much of what has been going on over many Parliaments? No matter who was in government, Governments have ignored these people, and we cannot continue to do so.

**Steve Brine:** My right hon. Friend and I do know each other very well, but I am afraid we will have to agree to differ on this; I do not agree that this is a whitewash. At the request of the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests, an expert, Nick Dobrik, who the House and outside world will know well as a respected and well-known thalidomide campaigner, attended all meetings of the expert working group and was invited to give a statement to the Commission on Human Medicines. Mr Dobrik is many things, but the notion that he is some sort of Government yes-man who would have allowed a whitewash to go on does not stand up to much scrutiny, if any at all.

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): A constituent of mine has had one of the most traumatic experiences over the past 24 hours. She was invited to come down and hear the results of that report, and she was not able to travel. Like many other such families, they have children who, they believe as a result of taking this drug, require them being at home to care for them. Does the Minister think 24 hours is a reasonable period

[*Hannah Bardell*]

of time in which to ask a family to travel to London, often from quite rural parts of the country? Does he also think it appropriate that the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and I were locked out of yesterday's Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency press conference? That in itself smacks of a cover-up.

A number of relevant documents were not included in this inquiry, so it is not fair to say that it was comprehensive and independent. Will the Minister consider looking again at the process? A significant amount of public money has been used, and we must make sure, and have confidence that, it was used appropriately.

As we know, "causal link" and "possible link" are two very different terms. Does the Minister think it appropriate that an expert working group changes the goalposts halfway through a process, when it is looking at a matter that is, as he says, so serious?

**Steve Brine:** First, may I correct myself? I might have said that the expert working group met "companies", not "families". If I said "companies", I wish to correct the record.

I agree with the hon. Lady that the notice the families were given was not good enough. I and my colleague in the other place have made that crystal clear. Some notice was given to Mrs Lyon on Friday last week that there was likely to be an event on Wednesday, but that was not confirmed until Monday, so that was the notice the family got, and I do not think that is good enough; I have made that very clear.

On the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who chairs the all-party group, being locked out of the press conference, I cannot imagine how that happened, and again I have sympathy on that. I expect the MHRA to look into that and explain that to me, because, while we may disagree, I can see how that merely feeds the conspiracy theory that some have around this subject.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): My hon. Friend is clearly struggling to defend this position. I urge him to look at the scope of this review and all the evidence that was presented to it, as all the evidence that was available should be looked at and looked at again. Without that, many people across this country will not be satisfied that justice has been done.

**Steve Brine:** With respect, I do not think I am struggling at all; I am just setting out a very clear position. Ministers are confident in the report and the review process. I say again that this was a comprehensive independent scientific review of all available evidence by experts across the expert working group who have a broad range of specialisms.

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is my understanding that in the research on fish, the researcher was reluctant to submit the findings because they had not been peer-reviewed. Is the Minister confident that all the animal studies that were considered in this review were properly and adequately peer-reviewed?

**Steve Brine:** I can only give the House the facts. Dr Vargesson's research was there, and he presented it orally, and orally only, to the group. The expert group felt that it wanted more than that, and he has not been able to provide it. At some point, if he does, I am sure that the group will be more than happy to look at it.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): One of the key points here is transparency. What work does the Minister think he can do to increase people's confidence and to share more information to dispel the image that things are being kept secret?

**Steve Brine:** As I have said, I think that I have been very honest about the way in which the families have been handled, about the notice that they have been given and about Members being able to attend report launches. There is no great secrecy here, but I can see how events like that merely feed that notion.

**Mrs Madeleine Moon** (Bridgend) (Lab): Like the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), I am reminded of the contaminated blood inquiry, which is ongoing. In 1975, the regulator knew that there was a potential 5:1 risk of the drug causing deformity. They told the manufacturers but not the patients, and papers were deliberately destroyed by the chief scientist. It is deeply worrying to the families that there is not an open and transparent investigation into this matter. Does the Minister know whether the Berlin archive papers were examined as part of this inquiry, because they demonstrate the cover-up that has happened over many years?

**Steve Brine:** No, I do not. I will write to the hon. Lady about that, but I can tell her that issues relating to the historical regulatory process were outside the scope and remit of this review.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): I come to this having had no constituency involvement in this issue at all, but I have been listening to the exchanges this morning and it is quite clear that the level of concern on both sides of the House is sufficient for the Government to call a debate on the matter in Government time, so that all these issues can be properly explored.

**Steve Brine:** All I can say is that, right on cue, the Leader of the House has arrived and is sitting right next to me, and I suspect that she has heard my hon. Friend's request.

**Martin Whitfield** (East Lothian) (Lab): Is the Minister aware of the study in 1979 from Primodos that concluded that the visceral malformations should be considered to be drug-related? The manufacturer seems to have made a link that does not appear to have been dealt with in the report. Does he acknowledge that serious concern is being expressed on both sides of the House about the transparency of this report and that it behoves us all to try to make it transparent and understandable and, above all, to get to the correct answer?

**Steve Brine:** Yes, of course we all want to get to the correct answers. Science and clinical practice have moved on significantly since the 1970s. As the hon. Gentleman knows, there have been far-reaching advances in the regulation of medicines. One of the reasons that the

report has been delayed is that it was felt that it needed to contain far more human-speak, rather than official-speak. That is why I said that Ministers now had confidence in the report and the review process and that we are now going to focus on implementing the report's recommendations.

**Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): This is simply a matter of confidence. My constituent, Charlotte Fensome, her parents and her brother Steven simply do not have confidence in this report. I trust the Minister, who I know is thoughtful about these matters and wishes that all the families and parents had had their concerns properly taken into account, but the report that was brought forward yesterday falls incredibly short when it comes to inspiring confidence. That is a great shame. I am thoroughly dissatisfied with the complete lack of transparency and with the preparation of the report. We had only 24 hours' notice of this. Will he meet me and other members of the all-party parliamentary group, so that he can hear from the campaigners and truly listen to their concerns?

**Steve Brine:** I take the comments of my hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour on board. As I have already said, my hon. Friend Lord O'Shaughnessy is meeting the all-party group on 6 December, and I am sure that she will be more than welcome to attend that meeting.

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): The report must be judged against the background of the fact that the thalidomide scandal involved only 20 birth defects in America and 2,000 in this country, that we are still misinforming and under-informing mothers and potential mothers about the valproate scandal and that GlaxoSmithKline was fined \$3 billion for distorting the results of its research. The Minister must tell us how many members of the expert group are present or past employees of the pharmaceutical industry.

**Steve Brine:** I cannot give the hon. Gentleman that information at the Dispatch Box, but he mentions the thalidomide tragedy and I have already said that Nick Dobrik attended all the meetings of the expert working group as an invited expert at the request of the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests. Nick is most certainly not a Government placeman or yes-man.

**Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I have a constituent who has been affected by this issue, and they want justice. Based on what I have heard today, justice has fallen short in this case. In any normal circumstances, justice must not only be done, but it must be seen to be done. If the criteria have not been applied correctly, we would in normal circumstances have a review to get the correct decision in the end. Will the Minister look at the matter and get it reviewed?

**Steve Brine:** My hon. Friend is right to speak up for his constituent. At the risk of repeating myself, the patient voice was present throughout, and the members of the expert working group were deeply moved by the experiences of the families involved. However, the conclusions do not take away from the real suffering of the families and nothing can. Nothing can turn the

clock back. Ministers are confident in both the report and the review process, and we now have to implement the recommendations.

**Jo Platt** (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): I have been contacted by my constituent Adele, whose mother has suffered immense guilt over the loss of a child, which she now believes to be related to the Primodos hormone pregnancy test. To add further upset, when victims were brought to the inquiry, they were given only half a day to be interviewed. I implore the Minister to listen to individual cases, such as the one I describe, and to explain what steps the Government will take to ensure that the women get the answers they so desperately seek.

**Steve Brine:** The step that we will take is to implement the report's recommendations. As I have already said, the way the families were handled when they came down to speak to the expert working group could have been a lot better, which is the understatement of the day, and I apologise for that on behalf of the MHRA.

**Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): A constituent who took one of the Primodos tests and whose son was born deaf visited my surgery on Friday, and she is deeply disappointed with the latest outcome. The Minister said a few minutes ago that checks had to be made before the final report was published, so what hope can he offer her and other parents that the matter will not be swept aside, that work will continue to flush out the truth and that the affected families will be properly supported?

**Steve Brine:** All I said is that there were checks to be made to ensure that the report was as readable and as accessible as possible. We are confident in the report, and we are not going to sweep it away and forget about it and move on to the next story; we will implement the recommendations.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister outline what support is on offer to those who took Primodos and were traumatised by stillbirth when it was not possible to carry out genetic testing because the baby had died and the remains were gone? We understand the Minister's compassion, but where is the redress for the still-grieving parents? Where is their support? Where is their help?

**Steve Brine:** I repeat that we cannot turn the clock back. The conclusions of any review, no matter how it is done, cannot take away from the suffering of families and constituents. I repeat that the review of the evidence by the expert working group was comprehensive, independent and scientific. We are confident in the report and in the review process, and we will now get on with implementing the recommendations.

**Mr Dennis Skinner** (Bolsover) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that in all the years that I have been here, I have never heard of such a decision, particularly one made by this party, presented by a Minister of Health who is constantly telling us all about the Stafford inquiry and how important the last Stafford inquiry was? It is time that he considered the possibility of having this thing reviewed, bearing in mind that we are dealing with drug firms that have millions and millions of pounds. He should

[Mr Dennis Skinner]

start all over again from the beginning. It will otherwise be a bad day for the Government if he is allowed to say what he has without listening to the people from both sides of the House who have rubbished the report.

**Steve Brine:** I could have sworn I heard the hon. Gentleman bring the word “party” into this. That is deeply unfortunate, and I do not think it is helpful to anybody. Last time I checked, there have been Governments of both colours since the 1950s.

As for bringing Stafford and patient safety into this, the Secretary of State for Health takes many criticisms but he has placed patient safety and getting to the bottom of the issues around Stafford at the heart of his agenda. It is because we do not bury our head in the sand and sweep these things under the carpet—as, I am sorry to say, happened in the past—that we are uncovering this and doing the best for the families with the report’s recommendations. Nothing can turn the clock back and nothing can undo the suffering of these families.

**Mr Speaker:** As has been said, this is absolutely not a party matter. Colleagues have expressed their interest in a debate on this matter, and I can simply say from the Chair that, one way or the other, through one vehicle or another, this matter will be debated if Members want it to be debated.

## Business of the House

11.10 am

**Valerie Vaz** (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom):** The business for next week is as follows:

**MONDAY 20 NOVEMBER**—Motion to approve a Ways and Means resolution relating to the Taxation (Cross-Border Trade) Bill.

**TUESDAY 21 NOVEMBER**—Continuation of consideration in Committee of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 3).

**WEDNESDAY 22 NOVEMBER**—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will deliver his Budget statement.

**THURSDAY 23 NOVEMBER**—Continuation of the Budget debate.

**FRIDAY 24 NOVEMBER**—The House will not be sitting. The provisional business for the week commencing 27 November will include:

**MONDAY 27 NOVEMBER**—Continuation of the Budget debate.

**TUESDAY 28 NOVEMBER**—Conclusion of the Budget debate.

**WEDNESDAY 29 NOVEMBER**—Opposition day (5th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the Scottish National party. Subject to be announced.

**THURSDAY 30 NOVEMBER**—Debate on a motion on treatment of SMEs by RBS Global Restructuring Group, followed by debate on a motion on mental health and suicide within the autism community. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**FRIDAY 1 DECEMBER**—Private Members’ Bills.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for the remainder of November will be:

**MONDAY 20 NOVEMBER**—Debate on an e-petition relating to the TV licence fee.

**THURSDAY 23 NOVEMBER**—General debate on anti-bullying week, followed by general debate on the 100th anniversary of the Air Force (Constitution) Act 1917.

**MONDAY 27 NOVEMBER**—Debate on an e-petition relating to university tuition fees.

**TUESDAY 28 NOVEMBER**—General debate on Dr Elsie Inglis and the contribution of women to world war one.

**THURSDAY 30 NOVEMBER**—General debate on deafness and hearing loss.

Mr Speaker, thank you for sending out notification today of the extension to the telephone helpline service to include staff of the Commons and of the other place. This will help ensure that all staff can access the counselling support they need, both by phone and in person, and can raise any grievance or complaint they wish to make. I am sure this will be widely welcomed across the estate.

I take the opportunity to thank the Members of the Youth Parliament who filled this Chamber last Friday with energetic and passionate debate. They did themselves proud, and I wish them the best with their future campaigns.

I also congratulate the thousands of organisations hosting UK Parliament Week events this week. I had an excellent evening with the Wootton scouts in my constituency to answer their questions on Parliament, and I am sure many colleagues have had and will have similar events.

**Mr Speaker:** I completely endorse what the Leader of the House has just said about the sitting of the UK Youth Parliament last Friday, about which I hope I was suitably expansive and congratulatory at the time. I also echo what she said about Parliament Week. I am glad that she herself has invested in it and derived satisfaction from it.

**Valerie Vaz:** I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. I note that next Tuesday we have day three of our consideration of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill—cheer!

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con) Hooray!

**Valerie Vaz:** That is day three of eight. We are talking about clause 5 and schedule 1. Can the Leader of the House confirm that the deadline for new clauses and amendments is 5.30 pm today? I have asked her previously about proper notice being given for Members, in the interests of our democracy, so will she ensure that she gives Members proper notice of consideration of Bills and ensure that this does not happen again? Can she say whether the Committee of the whole House will be completed before Christmas recess, which begins on 21 December? Will the Bill be in the other place before the Christmas recess? My friends in the other place are keen to help out.

Will the Leader of the House ensure that the List of Ministers' Interests is updated, as it was last updated in December 2016? This is vital not just for Ministers, but for Members, because some of them, such as the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), may have another position. It seems that in an article, in his other job as an investment manager, he said it is:

“Time to look further afield as UK economy hits the brakes”.

Will the Leader of the House therefore say whether it is Government policy for Government Members, in their other jobs, to advocate not investing in the country?

It is difficult to understand how the Government cannot know the size of the divorce bill. Surely the Chancellor will have to know this amount of money, because he has to set his Budget. This just smacks of more fiscally incompetent government. The way the Government dealt with the Paradise papers, including in the response they gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) earlier this week, was appalling. We have had the Panama papers and the Paradise papers, and now we have the invisible papers—the so-called “impact assessments” on the 58 sectors; first, they exist and then they do not exist, and then they exist in a form that is incomprehensible to everyone apart from Ministers. The deadline for providing these to the Committee is next week, because the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) said he needed “three weeks” from the time the motion was passed by this House. He said there was a mixture of “qualitative and quantitative analysis”, but I am sure

the Chair of the Select Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) is perfectly capable of analysing those papers. As the motion was very clear, will the Leader of the House give a commitment that the invisible papers will be available and say when they will be delivered, given that the motion was passed by this House?

The invisible papers are rapidly leading to an invisible Cabinet. Some may have missed it but there seems to be a new game in town: “I’m a Cabinet Minister get me out of here!” The week before last one left the Government and last week another did so, and another comes before a Select Committee and makes a mistake on Government policy, putting a young family at risk. This is a heartless Government—[*Interruption.*] Listen to the evidence: 38 days before Christmas eviction notices are being sent out following a policy that is flawed and cruel, denying people a chance to manage their life; if the Government think universal credit does not have an effect, will the Leader of the House say why a major housing association has stated that the arrears rate for those claiming the new benefit is about three times higher than that for other tenants? That is the evidence, and that evidence calls for a pause in the roll-out of universal credit.

I note that there is to be a debate on tuition fees in Westminster Hall next week, but we would like the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation to come to the House to make a statement and explain why the chief executive of the Student Loans Company has been sacked. Given that his Department is a major shareholder, with 85%, will the Leader of the House ensure that the Minister comes here, particularly as some students have overpaid their loan by £10,000 and the budget is £100 million? [*Interruption.*] It is in the papers today—it is in *The Times*.

Finally, I come to House matters. Will the Leader of the House say what day and time has been allocated for the debate on the restoration and renewal programme? She has previously talked about December, but given the Budget debate and the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, we do not have many days left before the Christmas recess. I, too, wish to remind everybody that they have three days left of #Parliamentweek2017. This was kicked off brilliantly by the ninth sitting of the Youth Parliament, and we have you to thank, Mr Speaker, for allowing it to sit here. Its Members are fantastic, treating this House with such respect and listening to the arguments on both sides. We can learn lots of lessons from them. On your behalf, I thank all the staff and volunteers who co-ordinated the whole day. Their topics for the year ahead were “Votes at 16” and “A curriculum to prepare us for life”. As the Leader of the House said, Parliament’s education service has ensured that 4,000 events are taking place throughout the country, with more than 900 primary schools and more than 300 secondary schools taking part. I thank them all for their efforts in educating the next generation on democracy.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I think both the hon. Lady and I thoroughly enjoyed seeing the enthusiasm of the young people in the Youth Parliament in this place. I absolutely endorse what she said about our pleasure at young people’s interest in our democracy and politics.

On her question about tabling new clauses and amendments to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, the deadline is the rise of the House today. She asked

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

whether the Committee of the whole House on the Bill will be completed by Christmas. She will be aware of the usual procedure: because it is difficult to project forward with absolute certainty for a lengthy period of time, we will continue to update the House every week about the future business in the usual way, as far as we are able to do so.

The hon. Lady suggested that the Government are somehow not clear on our negotiations with the EU. Far from it: the Government are entirely clear. We are seeking to get the best possible deal for the United Kingdom when we leave the European Union in March 2019, as stipulated by the triggering of article 50. The entire Government are working to that end.

The hon. Lady mentioned the Paradise papers. Since 2010, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has secured £160 billion more in tax revenues as a result of steps taken to reduce tax avoidance and evasion. The Government have taken a lead in efforts on greater international tax transparency. My right hon. Friend the former Prime Minister took enormous steps to ensure that our Crown dependencies, overseas territories and other international colleagues and friends work with us to make sure that we stamp out tax avoidance and evasion. Nobody has done more than this country to achieve that.

The hon. Lady asked about the 58 impact assessments. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has made it clear that he is working with the Chairman of the Exiting the European Union Committee, the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), to find a way forward that will make sense of the impact assessments in such a way that they can be useful. We must balance that with the need not to hamper the negotiations, while at the same time providing maximum transparency.

The hon. Lady asked about universal credit, which has been discussed many times in the House. To be clear: universal credit is being rolled out very slowly and all the lessons learned are being taken on board. More than 50% of those on universal credit are now receiving an early payment so that they can manage their finances. The Government have listened to the views of the House and taken steps to improve the roll-out of universal credit.

The hon. Lady asked about the Student Loans Company. I encourage her to direct her question to the relevant Department, perhaps through a parliamentary question on the specifics of the issue with the chief executive of the Student Loans Company. I am sure she would agree that it is not helpful for a public servant effectively to undermine the work of the company they are managing on behalf of the Government.

The hon. Lady asked about the debate on restoration and renewal. She will know as well as I do that we are seeking to bring a motion to both Houses as soon as possible. It is our intention to do that before the House rises for Christmas but, as ever, that will of course be business permitting.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Before I call the first Back Bencher, I should advise the House that there is a statement by the Leader of the House to follow on an extremely

important matter of great interest to Members in all parts of the House. Thereafter, we have two debates to take place under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee, to which more than 30—from memory, I would say 35—Members have submitted an application to speak. Those debates have to finish by 5 o'clock. Thereafter, there are two further matters that are potentially debatable for a total of three hours. That may very well not happen, but it could, so there is a premium on brevity. First, if colleagues were late, I ask them please not to stand and try to take part; that is not fair. Secondly, can people please ask single-sentence questions without preamble today? I know that the Leader of the House will respond with characteristically pithy replies.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): Last week, at the transport in the north debate, I raised the matter of the long-dormant plans to extend the M11 up to the Humber bridge. Such a move would be a great boost for the midlands engine and the northern powerhouse. Can the Leader of the House find time for a debate?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend is a big champion for his constituency and for the north, and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate on that very matter.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. May I also congratulate the Youth Parliament on the proceedings last week? Is it not strange that we invite young people to this House to have a debate and then send them away and tell them that they cannot participate in our democracy until they are 18?

It has been only a couple of weeks since the last business questions, but two weeks in politics must seem like an eternity for this Government. In that time, they have managed to lose two members of the Cabinet, and the Brexit civil war now raging would actually put the Roundheads and Cavaliers to shame. We should fear not, because the Environment Secretary has apparently been auditioning at Cabinet meetings for the role of Chancellor by, according to his colleagues, using lots of “economicky” words, so all is not lost.

Mr Speaker, I wrote to you this week, stating that, in my view, the Government are in contempt of this House for not forwarding the Brexit analysis papers as instructed by a binding motion of this House. It is entirely up to you how you respond to this, Mr Speaker, but, yesterday, I noted that, in response to a point of order, you said that the Government have a three-week period starting from the Minister's statement last week to comply with the instructions of this House.

I must say, Mr Speaker, you have been characteristically generous to the Government in allowing them three weeks, because that motion had no time limit attached to it. I ask the Leader of the House today, will we see those papers next week? Will we see them in full, without any redactions or qualifications, and will they be supplied to the Brexit Committee as instructed by this House?

Finally, it is the Budget next week, and we are all very much looking forward to it. Listening to the Prime Minister yesterday, it seems that the Scottish National party has been successful in ensuring that Scottish police and fire services will be exempt from VAT. A single

Scottish police force is something that all parties in Scotland have supported over the years. I am sure that the Leader of the House will want to welcome that and thank all the other parties of this House for getting behind the SNP in this campaign.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I reiterate only that the Government are fully committed to making a success of Brexit and of fulfilling our domestic agenda. That is absolutely where we stand. On the impact assessment papers, I told the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) that we will comply with the motion of the House, but that there is a balance to be struck between ensuring that we act in the best interests of the public—in the national interest—and complying with the wishes of the House. On the hon. Gentleman's third point on a single Scottish police force, of course the UK Government will support and ensure, in every way we possibly can, that it is a success.

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The Leader of the House may be aware that, last week, the official Businesses in Scotland 2017 report showed that the number of businesses per person is 27% higher across the United Kingdom compared with Scotland. May I ask my right hon. Friend for a debate on what the Government can do to support business start-ups across the UK, especially when the Scottish Government are doing all they can to chase them away?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I know that he as well as the Government are working hard to support businesses and entrepreneurs right across the United Kingdom. However, as he points out, many of the levers to growth are devolved to the Scottish Government, not least business rates. It is in their power to make Scotland an even more attractive business destination. I am sure that he and many of my hon. Friends will be encouraging the Scottish Government to focus less on a second independence referendum and more on turning Scotland into one of the most attractive places in the world for doing business.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement. May I make a special plea for as early notice as possible of any Back-Bench Business Committee time after the Budget in the run-up to the Christmas recess? In particular, there is a time-sensitive application for a debate on fisheries from the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray). The hon. Lady has asked for that debate to be held as close to, but before, the Fisheries Council meeting in Brussels on 11 and 12 December, so I make a special request for that debate to be held on 7 December, if at all possible.

On a personal note, tomorrow is 17 November, which marks the four-month anniversary of the Tyne and Wear MPs' letter to the Secretary of State for Transport. This matter has been raised in this House at Transport questions on 19 October and in the debate on transport in the north on 6 November. We sent a follow-up letter on 12 September, but we have not yet had a holding response, never mind a response. This is beyond the pale—four months is well beyond Cabinet Office recommendations for ministerial replies to MPs' letters.

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman knows that we will always give him as much notice as we can of Back-Bench time. I am grateful to him for raising the specific point about fisheries, which is a matter of huge interest to many of us across the House; I will see what can be done. With regard to his letter to the Transport Secretary, Transport questions will be held on 30 November, but if he wants to write to me, I will certainly take up his point with the Department.

**Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): I was not expecting to be called, Mr Speaker—thank you. Will the Leader of the House please advise me how best to raise in this House the issue of the £29 million that is ready and waiting for the Alexandra Hospital in Redditch? It wants to start the work, and the patients are looking forward to the investment and the improvements in our health service for which they have waited a long time. Will she help me to speed up this process?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend is a great champion for the NHS care in her constituency. I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can hear directly from Ministers about exactly what more can be done.

**Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Today is World Pancreatic Cancer Day. Last night, the all-party parliamentary group on pancreatic cancer launched its report "The Need for Speed: Diagnosing Pancreatic Cancer Earlier, Giving Patients a Chance of Living Better for Longer". May we have a statement from the Government about what progress is being made to tackle the disease?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I share the hon. Gentleman's concern about this devastating type of cancer. I encourage him to raise the matter at Health questions or to seek an Adjournment debate. Some of these specific health issues can benefit significantly from more focused attention.

**Alec Shelbrooke** (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Last week, the Labour chair of the plans panel on Leeds City Council referred to those who are opposed to the destruction of the green belt in my constituency as "sharp-elbowed NIMBYs". May we have a statement from the relevant Minister on the quasi-judicial responsibilities of plans panel chairs and the course of action available to applicants, and my constituents in Elmet and Rothwell, when councillors breach those responsibilities?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am sure that my hon. Friend heard the Prime Minister say yesterday that we will continue to protect the green belt. He raises an important point. It is vital that local councillors, like everyone in public life, behave in a way that inspires the confidence and trust of the electorate. My hon. Friend is right to raise his constituents' concerns. There are some options that he might want to consider if he feels that councillors have breached their responsibilities. There is a code of conduct, required by all local authorities, that applies to local authority members, and there are procedures for considering complaints where members have breached that code of conduct.

**Anna McMorrin** (Cardiff North) (Lab): We have seen various reports on the growth of fake news, and growing evidence of Russian involvement in the EU referendum and in our politics. Is it not time that we regulated the

[Anna McMorrin]

social media platforms? The chief executive and the chair of Ofcom both say that Facebook and Google are media companies and should be regulated as such. May we have a Government debate on bringing these companies under UK law on this issue to ensure that their content can be trusted?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this very concerning issue. The Government recognise the need to protect the reliability and objectivity of information—it is an essential component of our democracy. We are working with industry to ensure that high-quality online news media have a sustainable future and, at the same time, that low-quality and fake news is not commercially incentivised. To date, we have not seen evidence of successful interference in UK democratic processes, but, naturally, we would take robust action should there be evidence that this has happened in the United Kingdom.

**Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con):** In a disgusting and unacceptable snub to the people of Moray, excessive delivery charges are often applied, and in some cases companies refuse to deliver to Moray at all, because we have an AB and an IV postcode. Can we have a debate in the House so that I and other Members can raise this issue and the Government can explain how they will work with me and other interested parties to right this wrong?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend has raised this issue a number of times, and he mentioned it in his maiden speech. It is an unjust state of affairs, and I completely agree that the people in his constituency deserve as good a service as people elsewhere in the UK. Retailers do have legal obligations to provide clear information about delivery charges, and I would be very concerned if they did not. I am sure the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy would be happy to hear the specifics for his local area. I know he has applied for a Westminster Hall debate, and I am sure a number of Members will be very interested to take part in it.

**Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP):** Over a month ago, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs over his assertion that it was too difficult to unpack the allocation of common agricultural policy convergence uplift funding. When will I get a response to that letter? Will the Leader of the House confirm that it is not too difficult to unpack that allocation and that it is simply a matter of a Government decision?

**Andrea Leadsom:** If the hon. Gentleman would like to write to me, I can take that up with DEFRA on his behalf, but I cannot address the specifics personally.

**Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con):** A year ago, I and my constituents were furious when the urgent care centre in my constituency was closed overnight. We were categorically promised by the chief executive of the acute trust that that was temporary—if it was not temporary, it would be illegal, because the trust had not consulted. It still has not consulted, we are a year on

and the trust is looking to downgrade the centre. Can we have a debate on the way consultations work—or, frankly, do not work—in our constituencies?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My right hon. Friend raises what sounds like an extremely worrying development. He will be aware that all significant service change proposals must meet the Government's four reconfiguration tests of support from clinical commissioners, clinical evidence, patient and public engagement, and support for patient choice. Additional NHS England guidance is that proposed changes should be tested for their impact on overall bed numbers in the area. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. He may wish to take it up at Health oral questions or through an Adjournment debate for his hospital.

**Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD):** Will the Leader of the House make time available to discuss the 58 sectoral reports? I suggest this needs to be done before or shortly after 28 November, because if Ministers have not delivered by then, an allegation of contempt will be made against them. A debate would enable us to discuss why, far from there being extra money for the NHS, more money is being spent on lawyers, and more money will be spent on customs staff and on duplicating a whole range of EU regulators—none of which, of course, was mentioned by the leave campaign.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I have twice now given the response on the 58 impact assessment reports. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union will comply with the request of the House, but there is a balance between looking after the public interest and making sure we do not damage our negotiating stance, while at the same time complying with the House's request.

**Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con):** This Sunday, the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women will proudly parade at the Cenotaph, remembering the comrades who fell in conflicts. It is also Mitzvah Day, when thousands of people from across the UK will come together to help the poor and needy. Could my right hon. Friend therefore find Government time for a debate on volunteering so that we can celebrate those who give their time voluntarily for no reward?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I share my hon. Friend's gratitude and enthusiasm for those who volunteer. So many services are provided and so much good is done by people who offer their time for nothing, just to provide help and support to their fellow man, and I thoroughly encourage him, as the subject has been raised a number of times by Members across the House, to seek perhaps a Back-Bench or a Westminster Hall debate on this subject. I know that many Members would be interested in taking part.

**Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op):** Can I urge the Leader of the House to take more seriously what the Prime Minister said this week about Russian interference in our democratic processes—not just here but right across Europe—not just in terms of social media but in money flowing here, both in the referendum campaign and in our general election? We have not had any motion in this House on that subject—no Select Committee, and our Intelligence and Security Committee

is only announced today. Can we not get on with it—scrutinise, bring the spooks in, GCHQ, get some answers?

**Mr Speaker:** I could not keep up with the hon. Gentleman, but I reckon there were at least six sentences there. I would remind colleagues that I was appealing for single-sentence questions, preferably without lots of semi-colons.

**Andrea Leadsom:** Mr Speaker, I think the hon. Gentleman's grammar was perfectly acceptable. He raises an incredibly important point. I think the Prime Minister was absolutely clear—she is extremely concerned about interference by Russian sources, and she is looking at this very carefully. She could not have been clearer. I think he should be reassured by that.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Ah yes—a master of brevity: Mr Philip Hollobone.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Will the Leader of the House write a joint letter, with the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, to all the Chairmen of Select Committees, reminding them that they have opportunities to make a statement to the House whenever one of their reports is published? We have today had a publication from the Home Affairs Committee. It would have been interesting to ask the Chairman of that Committee questions about a report.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I would be delighted to do such a thing, if the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) is happy to do the same. I gather that it was in fact raised at the Liaison Committee, but I think that is a very good idea. I thank my hon. Friend.

**Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab): Before the Leader of the House came into the Chamber, she will have heard the discussion about Primodos. The report published yesterday had already been published a week before, but not formally. The conclusion of that report was different from the one actually published yesterday. In light of that and of what she heard earlier, would she please consider having a debate on this matter in Government time, and will she also ask the Secretary of State for Health to come to the House to make a statement?

**Andrea Leadsom:** Mr Speaker, I am very pleased that you granted the urgent question, giving the Minister the opportunity to come and answer some questions. I encourage the hon. Lady, if she was not satisfied with the level of information, to seek a further debate—perhaps a debate in Westminster Hall or an Adjournment debate in the House—to further probe this subject.

**Jo Churchill** (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): This weekend we celebrate St Edmund's Day, commemorating Edmund the Martyr; some people think he should be the first patron saint of the UK, not St George. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking everybody and welcoming their celebration this weekend, and would she—and indeed you, Mr Speaker—like to come and see the town of the first patron saint of England?

**Andrea Leadsom:** Mr Speaker, I am sure you and I would thoroughly enjoy such a visit. My hon. Friend represents a very beautiful constituency, with that world-

famous cathedral dedicated to St Edmund. It is great that he has been commemorated in this way, and I am delighted to share her pleasure at the celebrations taking place.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): I am not at all reassured by what has been said about Russia, because the answer that the Leader of the House gave today was completely different from what the Prime Minister said, and what the Foreign Secretary said in Committee. The Prime Minister says, "Mr Putin, we know what you are up to." Well, could she come and tell us what he is up to, because it seems to include targeting individual Members of this House on a regular, daily basis and making sure that the democratic process is undermined? It did not reassure me to hear that she says they have not seen "successful" examples. Well, I think they were pretty successful in the Brexit referendum.

**Andrea Leadsom:** The Prime Minister was quite clear that we are taking this extremely seriously, and that she is gravely concerned. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government are investing nearly £2 billion to protect the UK from cyber-attack. We have been absolutely clear about the work we are undertaking to ensure that there is no interference in the electoral process. The Government are continuing to work with the Electoral Commission on the issue of imprints on electronic materials. I realise that the hon. Gentleman will never be satisfied. He may wish to seek an Adjournment debate or a Westminster Hall debate in order to make sure that a Minister comes to answer his specific concerns.

**Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Might the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on the implications for cross-border safety and the delivery of policing resulting from the Scottish Government's plan to abolish the British Transport police in Scotland by integrating it fully with Police Scotland? The British Transport Police Federation, rail operators and, ultimately, many of my constituents who use the east coast main line are deeply concerned about this issue, which will have an impact on both sides of the border.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point. He is of course aware that the decision to integrate the functions of the British Transport police into Police Scotland is devolved, but I recognise his concerns about this approach. He will also be aware that our colleagues in the Scottish Parliament are raising those concerns with the Scottish Government. I have also been very clear that the UK Government will work with the authorities to ensure that overall policing, including policing across the border, remains as effective as it currently is.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): We believe that the Government are about to give the green light to the first UK fracking in six years, in North Yorkshire. Can we have an urgent debate on how that is compatible with our climate change objectives, given that the Committee on Climate Change has said that three key tests have to be met? The Government have not met them, yet we believe the decision in Ryedale is imminent.

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady and I have discussed this very issue on a number of occasions, and she is well aware that for the UK's energy security we will need continued access to gas for many years to come as we move to a renewable, zero-carbon-electricity future, but that it is not possible to do that overnight. Fracking is one industry that represents a huge opportunity for the UK, and our regulatory environment for it is the safest in the world.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am looking to move on to the statement at midday, so it looks as though several colleagues will lose out, but I know that Mr Chishti will want to ensure that that does not happen, so he will ask a question of one sentence and preferably no more than about 20 words.

**Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker—no pressure. Will the Government consider having a special medal of service for this year for all our emergency services in light of all the work they have done in these challenging times—the terrorist attacks in this country and the Grenfell disaster?

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend raises a point that I am sure all colleagues across the House would be delighted to join with. If he writes to me, I will certainly take the matter up with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Following another successful Youth Parliament, which the Leader of the House addressed, Mr Speaker chaired and I attended as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on youth affairs, when will the Government dedicate Government time to debating and voting on votes at 16, as that is one of their priorities and our debate was cut so short on our last sitting Friday?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am glad that the hon. Gentleman found time for that debate on votes at 16. He will realise that the issue does not command 100% support across the House, but I am sure he will find other opportunities to debate it in the near future.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): May we have a debate on the success of the Government's record in cutting carbon emissions while at the same time fostering business productivity? I say that in light of the fact that the Minister for Climate Change and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), is in Bonn as we speak, with lots of innovative businesses that have done so much in this field. We are global leaders and we should shout about it.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend has used her passion and experience to campaign on environmental issues ever since she has been in the House. She is right to point out that reducing carbon and growing our economy are now entirely compatible. We should all seek opportunities to praise and continue to develop the excellent work that is ongoing.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Today's *Financial Times* reports concerns over a "feeding frenzy" by "unscrupulous" pensions advisers targeting steel workers in south Wales. Can we have a statement from the Government and action by the Financial Conduct Authority?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am concerned to hear about the issue the hon. Gentleman raises and I encourage him to write to the Department, or to take part in oral questions, on that specific point, which seems to be of great concern.

**Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): May we have a debate on the importance of rotary clubs in our communities, and will my right hon. Friend join me in highlighting the charitable fundraising that clubs, such as Bolton Lever rotary club, do for incredibly important local and international charities?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend praises those who do so much work just to help their fellow man. Again, as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), I absolutely commend them for their work. I encourage Members to seek a debate soon to enable us to highlight some of the work that is carried out.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The universal credit roll-out has already commenced in Northern Ireland, but women who have conceived a third child due to rape and the organisations this Government expect to help them still do not have clarity about whether they will face prosecution under section 5 of the Criminal Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1967. Again, for the umpteenth time, may we have a debate, an oral statement or anything on the implications of the two-child limit and the rape clause for women and organisations in Northern Ireland?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important point. She will be aware that, in England, any such claim from a woman who has conceived a third child through non-consensual sex will not be dealt with by a Department for Work and Pensions or Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs member of staff; they will simply take in the claim and receive support and professional third-party advice, and we will not require any evidence of a criminal conviction or a judicial finding. It is very important that we continue to work with Northern Ireland to ensure that that policy is implemented as far as possible. It is a devolved matter, but we will continue to seek to influence the outcome.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): *The Sun* newspaper today published pictures of BBC workers asleep at their desk at the BBC News channel, although I cannot find any report about that on the BBC. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement or a debate on this next week?

**Andrea Leadsom:** Mr Speaker, I feel slightly stumped. My hon. Friend raises what I am sure is an important point, and I sincerely regret it if the reporters are so tired that they fall asleep on the job.

**Vernon Coaker** (Gedling) (Lab): Incredibly, the Prime Minister said yesterday that police budgets were protected. I have to say that that is news to Nottinghamshire police and many other forces across the country. May we have an urgent statement on police funding so that the Government can explain how the budget has been protected given that Nottinghamshire police has lost £54 million over the past five years and, if nothing changes, will lose £16 million over the next two years?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I can tell the hon. Gentleman that we protected overall police funding in real terms at the 2015 spending review, that the 2017-18 police funding settlement maintains protection for police spending in a fair deal for them and that we have increased the police transformation fund to £175 million this year. He will be aware—and no doubt delighted, as I am—that crime has fallen by about a third since 2010, according to the independent crime survey for England and Wales. That is testimony to the excellent work done by our police forces, to whom we are all extremely grateful.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The Leader of the House may be aware of the case of my constituent Bernie Ross, a former UEFA executive, who has been missing from Oxford since 18 October. It is believed that he may be in France or Switzerland. UEFA will not help him, and the family are struggling to get information from police forces in EU member states. Will the Leader of the House use her good offices to see whether the relevant Departments can give the family any assistance and get Bernie Ross home for Christmas?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am very sorry to hear about the hon. Lady's case. If she writes to me about it, I will certainly take it up on her behalf.

**Anna Soubry** (Broxtowe) (Con): Will the Leader of the House confirm immediately that Nottinghamshire police is about to recruit—indeed, is recruiting—an extra 120 police officers?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am delighted to hear my right hon. Friend's news direct from the horse's mouth. Again, I just want to pay tribute to the excellent work of our police forces right across the United Kingdom.

**Vernon Coaker:** Are you calling her a horse?

**Anna Soubry:** I am a mutineering horse.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I think the Leader of the House was referring to the right hon. Lady in the spirit of saying that she was the authentic voice of her people, just as the hon. Gentleman is the authentic voice of Gedling. *[Interruption.]* Order. Forget horses. We cannot have an ongoing turf war between Nottinghamshire Members.

**Chris Bryant:** That was the worst joke this year.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you.

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House inform the House when the results of the consultation on the penalties for causing death by dangerous driving will come before Parliament and be enshrined in law?

**Andrea Leadsom:** If the hon. Lady writes to me on that point, I will certainly take it up with the Ministry of Justice on her behalf.

**Jim McMahon** (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The Collective Spirit Free School in my constituency has closed, displacing 200 pupils. We have had an Adjournment debate on this, and I have met the Minister for School Standards, the regional schools commissioner and the National Audit Office, while we have also asked written questions and put in FOI requests, yet the Government still refuse to release the internal audit report on its financial probity and where the money eventually went. May we have a debate in Government time on the oversight of academies, free schools and university technical colleges?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman raises a specific point about a school in his constituency, which would be highly appropriate for an Adjournment debate.

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): The A19 in my constituency is at a standstill following an accident. Will the Leader of the House join me in supporting the campaign in the local press for a review of safety on the A19, and will she support a specific debate on the A19 and investment in road infrastructure in the north-east?

**Andrea Leadsom:** Transport questions will be held on 30 November, and I am sure that Ministers will be pleased to answer the hon. Gentleman's specific question.

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): When will those Members who visited Bangladesh last week have a chance to pass on to the House news about the dreadful suffering of the Rohingya people who have been cruelly persecuted, so that the issue is not forgotten about and remains visible to us? Their suffering is dreadful, the scale is unimaginable, and their help is pitiful.

**Andrea Leadsom:** All Members of the House will share the hon. Gentleman's concern about the plight of the Rohingya people. There are now believed to be more than 600,000 refugees in Bangladesh, and it is a major humanitarian crisis. The UK Government have given £47 million in relief, including £5 million to match the generous donations by the British public in response to an appeal by the Disasters Emergency Committee. There has been a Backbench Business Committee debate on the plight of the Rohingya, and I am sure there are further statements to come.

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): The Resolution Foundation has revealed that one in three businesses admit to under-investing, with a staggering nine out of 10 of those firms citing economic uncertainty as a contributing factor. The prospect of a hard Tory Brexit poses a further threat to business, which needs financial stability to facilitate investment. May we have a debate in Government time on the future of investment in the UK?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The Government are committed to a strong Brexit arrangement for the UK and our European friends that enables businesses to continue to thrive. The hon. Lady will be aware of the Government's industrial strategy that seeks to put true force underneath

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

particular segments of our industries, so that they can benefit from some of the amazing innovation, science and technology available in the United Kingdom.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): On 26 September the West Papuan people's petition, signed by 1.8 million people—71% of the population of West Papua—was presented to the UN's decolonisation committee. Yesterday, the International Academics of West Papua was launched in the Palace of Westminster. Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming that collective expression of will, and may I ask for a debate on West Papua?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am happy to share the hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm for the strength of that petition, and I encourage him to seek a debate in Westminster Hall or an Adjournment debate.

**Mrs Madeleine Moon** (Bridgend) (Lab): Kernow clinical commissioning group is to remove free transport for kidney dialysis patients, and instead introduce a financial and medical assessment. As chair of the all-party kidney group, may I ask for a debate on that as it is terrifying kidney dialysis patients?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I encourage the hon. Lady to seek to ask a question during Health questions, or an Adjournment debate, to focus on that specific issue.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Department for Work and Pensions has awarded a contract for facilities management to a company called

Interserve, which the media suggest is in major financial difficulty. May we have a statement or debate in Government time to address the concerns of the staff who are due to be transferred to that company?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I encourage the hon. Gentleman to write to the DWP with his specific concerns. He will appreciate that it will consider carefully all contractors to whom it gives business, to ensure that they are in a financially solvent position.

**David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): May we have a debate in Government time on the Burns report on Lords reform, so that we can once and for all put an end to hereditary peers in the Houses of Parliament?

**Andrea Leadsom:** We all welcome the Lords' review of their procedure. The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that it is not a priority for the Government to look at legislating for Lords reform, but we await with interest the conclusion of the Lords' review of their own proceedings.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): There has been an increase in human rights abuses in China, with the torture, detention and persecution of Christians and Tibetan Buddhists. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on this very important matter?

**Andrea Leadsom:** Right across the House, I think we all share a determination to see the rights of those of faith and of no faith upheld. The hon. Gentleman often raises very important points about rights abuses. I encourage him to seek a debate on the subject.

## Independent Complaints and Grievance Policy

12 noon

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom):** With permission, Mr Speaker, I will update the House on steps that are being taken to tackle harassment and abuse in Parliament.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made it clear, there can be no place for harassment, abuse or misconduct in politics. I said that we would take action in days, not weeks, and that is exactly what we have done. Getting this right matters to everyone here, and I want to thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who I know is taking a keen interest in this matter. I hope that today's statement will answer her questions.

Last week, the Prime Minister convened a meeting of the party leaders to discuss this matter. All party leaders attended, and there was an agreement to work together to make swift progress. The proposals outlined by the Prime Minister for an independent grievance procedure have been embraced across the House and I am reassured by the consensus. All parties have acknowledged that any proposal must adhere to three specific criteria: it must have cross-party agreement; it must include both Houses of Parliament; and it must be independent. The new system will be available to all who work here, including: all MPs' staff, the staff of Lords, including Cross-Benchers, interns, volunteers, journalists and constituency staff. It was agreed that the political parties would establish a cross-party working group to take this work forward, and I am pleased to report that the group met for the first time on Tuesday.

The working group is made up of representatives from every party and from both Houses: Conservative, Labour, Scottish National party, Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, Democratic Unionist party, Green and Cross-Benchers. Very importantly, the Members and Peers Staff Association and Unite are representing parliamentary staff on the group, ensuring that their experiences and requirements are taken fully into account. The first meeting of the working group made clear that the voices of staff will be at the heart of the process. Any new system will need the absolute confidence of those who use it.

The working group also agreed that the new procedure must be independent of political parties, and that to inform the group over the next two weeks, we will hear from a number of different contributors. This will include hearing from staff directly, as well as groups including ACAS, the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, and experts on a range of topics that will help us to shape a new process. Anyone who wishes to submit their thoughts or suggestions to the group in writing is also welcome to do so.

This is very early days for the working group and we will certainly be working quickly but thoroughly to make that sure that we create a new procedure that provides confidence to all who use it. In addition, I know that many members of staff have expressed an interest in the provision of HR training, as well as better employee support for staff. All those employing staff need a certain amount of guidance and training to enable them to be good employers.

This week, the working group heard directly from the Clerks of the two Houses, who provided a very helpful account of the procedure used by House staff. While we recognise that the Respect policy used by the House authorities provides an excellent reference point, the independent procedure we are seeking to build will take into account the specific needs of Parliament, and the group has acknowledged the need for more than just mediation. The working group agreed that a new system should provide support, advice and action on a wide spectrum of complaints around bullying and harassment. We will do everything in our power to ensure the solution is transparent, fair, and effective. And that fairness must also apply to MPs and peers. We recognise that, right across both Houses, we have many model employers who genuinely care about their staff and look after them extremely well.

We are working to a tight timeframe, but we have all acknowledged it is right to address this issue with urgency. The publication of the final proposal will balance the need for fast action with the need for due diligence. The working group, including its staff representatives, is considering the timetable carefully and aims to report back to the House before it rises for the Christmas recess.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you and Mr Speaker have said you hope that all parties will live up to their responsibilities by demonstrating both an appetite for change and a practical means of delivering it. That is exactly what we intend to do. I thank all parties for working together in a supportive fashion. We share this duty to bring about positive change. People come to work in this place for a number of reasons—out of public service, to support the party of their choice, or to gain new work experience—and nothing should deter them from pursuing those ambitions. We are all determined to ensure that this is a safe and fair place to work.

12.6 pm

**Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab):** I thank the Leader of the House for her statement and for letting me have sight of it, albeit late last night.

As the Leader of the House indicated, the working party has met. There are many issues to deal with, but we hope to have an outcome before the House rises for Christmas. The Labour party is working with all other parties to ensure that there is a robust process that everyone is signed up to, and that there will be due process. The shadow Minister for Women and Equalities is working hard to include everyone and is having many conversations too. We should also note that complaints are sub judice while they are going through the system and that nothing should be done to compromise further action, should it need to be taken. The process should also cover everyone who works on the estate, including contractors—it should form part of their contracts in the tendering process—and those seconded for a year from universities.

I want to mention a few steps that could be taken immediately. The Respect policy, on which House staff have worked for a long time and to which many have signed up, should be rolled out immediately to everyone working on the estate. We should respect the fact that people have taken a long time to refine the policy. Sometimes Members need a point of contact,

[Valerie Vaz]

but complainants and those complained about need professional advice, and complaints need to be reported immediately, so I am pleased to hear from the Leader of the House that the helpline has been rolled out to everyone working on the estate.

We should immediately put in place an independent specialist sexual abuse adviser, as the Leader of the Opposition has called for. That might be a matter for the Commission or the Government, but either way that clearly could be put in place now. I also suggest that the working party has a website and a point of contact so that anyone can make a contribution, including anonymously. Education and training could start now.

All parties' procedures have been looked at, refined and improved, and the Labour party will continue to look at its procedures. The Leader of the Opposition has made our position clear in a letter to the Prime Minister. I will read it out now, just in case she has not received it, as she mentioned at yesterday's Prime Minister's Question Time that she might not have received some correspondence:

"In the case of the Labour party, these procedures and safeguards were strengthened by our national executive committee in July. We are now appointing an independent external organisation for reporting complaints and to guide and support anyone affected by sexual harassment through the party's procedures. We have also appointed an independent legal expert, who will make recommendations as to how those procedures could be further strengthened. We have communicated these procedures to the party at every level in the week."

I know that other political parties are also working on their policies.

We all want a robust process that has the confidence of everyone, but only when it is tested will we know whether it is robust enough so that everyone can work safely in this amazing place for the good of our constituents and the country.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** I call Mr Bernard Jenkin.

**Mr Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for her statement—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. I beg the hon. Gentleman's pardon. I was much too quick in calling him; I have not given the Leader of the House an opportunity to respond to the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz). I do beg the right hon. Lady's pardon.

**Andrea Leadsom:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I welcome the comments made by the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz). We are both delighted that Mr Speaker arranged today for confirmation to be sent to staff in both Houses that the existing complaints helpline has been rolled out not just to House of Commons staff, but to staff in the other place, and, in addition, that face-to-face counselling will be available on the parliamentary estate from Monday 20 November. An email has been sent to all staff giving specific details of how to express a complaint, how to receive counselling and signposting, and so on. That is very important, and I am as pleased about it as the hon. Lady.

The hon. Lady mentioned the discussion in the working group about the provision of an independent sexual abuse expert to guide and advise that group, and we are

seeking to ensure that someone will be available in time for our next meeting. She suggested the very good idea of a website for contributions, which we will certainly consider, but in the meantime, as I said, those who wish to provide written contributions should feel free to do so. I am sure that both the hon. Lady and I would welcome any emails of that kind.

Although the issue of education and training is not within the working party's specific terms of reference, we will be discussing it further. We will be listening to thoughts from IPSA, among others, about what sort of training and HR support can be provided.

The hon. Lady referred to party policies and said that the Labour party has updated its party procedures. I gather that all parties have done likewise, and that those party policies have been made available on the parliamentary website. I look to you to correct me, Madam Deputy Speaker, if I am wrong and the information is not yet available, but I understand that that is the intention.

The hon. Lady observed that the system would only really be proven once it had been tested—of course she is right. I am sure that considering how we can review it after it has been operating for a little while will form part of the working party's final work.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call Mr Bernard Jenkin!

**Mr Jenkin:** I apologise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for also making a mistake.

I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. I agree that whatever needs to be done urgently must be done urgently to address the present situation, but as we graft more and more new bits on to current systems, will we not be in danger of adding to the confusion that already exists? The Public Affairs and Constitutional Administration Committee, which I chair, has submitted evidence to the review of our present code of conduct, which is being conducted by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. Much of the current problem arises from confusion about an inadequacy in the code.

As my right hon. Friend develops her proposals, will she agree that whatever is put in place now, there needs to be a comprehensive assessment in the longer term—perhaps by a special Select Committee such as the House of Commons Governance Committee, which was formed during the last Parliament—of what is being introduced and how it should integrate with IPSA, the Standards and Privileges Committees and so on?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for his Committee's work on this issue, and for keeping me up to date with its investigations and reports.

I hope I can reassure my hon. Friend that there is not intended to be any confusion about the outcome of the working group's activities. We aim to create an independent complaints and grievances procedure that will be run within the House, using as a reference point the work that has already been done here, as well as the office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and, potentially, support from existing organisations in the House. We intend to end up with the independent helpline, which will continue to provide immediate guidance and signposting, and an independent grievance procedure that will enable action to be taken against Members,

staff, peers and so on. In addition, however, there will always continue to be the parties' own complaints procedures. There will not be a mixture of those different processes; they will be separate, and very clearly set out. I hope I can reassure all Members on both sides of the House that there will be extreme clarity about how individuals can express their grievances.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for early sight of her statement. I commend her for the timely way in which she has set up the working group, her leadership on this issue, and the open and inclusive way in which she has dealt with the business of putting the group together and organising its important work. She is right to say that it must be a fully cross-party group with an input from staff bodies across the House. I am particularly delighted that Unite and MAPSA will be involved. Perhaps the Leader of the House will consider including other representative bodies.

Our approach has been to ensure that there is zero tolerance for any abuse or inappropriate behaviour, and that all means are deployed to tackle not just current issues, but the historical patriarchy and cultural hierarchies that have been allowed to develop in the House and have gone unchallenged in the past. We all agree that an independent grievance procedure that provides a safe place where anyone on the estate can raise any harassment issue should be the group's objective and, as the Leader of the House has said, a solid start has been made. We must ensure that we act in a timely manner and are able to deal with each issue as it comes along.

I am sure that the Leader of the House agrees that anything that we design must have the full confidence of everyone who works on the estate, must be truly independent, and must command the support of all parties in the House. She was right to say—I can confirm this on behalf of the Scottish National party—that all parties have been developing and redesigning their own complaints procedures, which are available to all staff and to the various political parties in the House.

The Leader of the House mentioned the extension of the complaints helpline. Can she tell us when staff can expect to see some new facilities and resources to which they can turn, and perhaps remind everyone what facilities for complaints are currently available?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and his party for their offer to co-operate, very sincerely, in resolving this issue. As I said earlier, all parties have agreed that this is something we must deal with urgently and in a collegiate and non-partisan way. I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his reassurance in that regard. He is absolutely right to say that the independence of the new grievances and complaints procedure must be assured, and must have the full confidence of everyone who will be using it. We will ensure that, in due course, we can confirm very clearly to all staff—to all who work on the parliamentary estate and, indeed, those who work in our constituency offices—exactly what options are open to them.

Let me reiterate that we currently have the helpline, which is now available to all staff in both Houses—along with face-to-face counselling sessions if required—but that has a limited capability. The grievance procedure that we seek to establish will have a far greater capability

when it comes to action to deal with particular grievances and complaints. There will, of course, always be the individual party process as well. There will be three different sources enabling people to express grievances or complaints. Only two of them, the helpline and the party processes, are currently in place, and it is the third—the independent cross-House, cross-party grievance process that we intend to establish—that will, I think, provide the full cultural change that we seek.

**Mrs Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I also welcome this statement and the rapid action taken across all the parties to try and deal with what is a very serious matter. This must continue to be a cross-party matter in all parts of this House and we must continue to make the rapid progress we have made so far.

As we are looking forward to the future, will the Leader of the House give some consideration to perhaps pre-empting repeats of some of the abuse that has occurred in the past by making an information document available to all who apply to work on the parliamentary estate and in Members of Parliament's offices, so people are clear about the standards of conduct to be expected from those privileged enough to work in this environment? May we also put that standard and conduct of behaviour clearly up on our website, so that people also know how they engage with MPs' members of staff, people working here, and, indeed, even MPs themselves?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My right hon. Friend raises an important point about the need to ensure that everybody who works here understands the rules and code of conduct expected of them. There are many different places in which to find codes of conduct; indeed, the respect policy itself is very clear on the type of mutual respect required in this place, and online training is also available for those who want to understand more about the legal definitions of harassment and bullying, and I encourage those with a particular interest in pursuing that to look at it.

My right hon. Friend raises the important point that, once we have established our proper independent grievance and complaints procedure, we will also want to look at how we can roll it out, so that nobody can be in any doubt about the sort of behaviour that is expected of them.

**Jess Phillips** (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I welcome the Leader of the House's statement, although I notice from having quickly read through it, as well as having listened to it, that it does not use the term "sexual harassment" once. I therefore support what the shadow Leader of the House said in encouraging the Leader of the House to ensure that there is a specialist sexual violence service that gives advice to the working group and is in place for people in this place afterwards. I urge that mediation in cases of sexual harassment is never appropriate.

Employees have been put into this process in the round, but what if a person who used to work here wants to make a complaint against a Member of Parliament? What if an activist in a political party wants to make a complaint here through Parliament? What if a journalist who is not a passholder wanted to make a complaint? All the complaints we have seen so far speak to what I am asking here; where would they go in this new system?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I thank the hon. Lady for her urgent question earlier this week, which gave rise to this statement today, where we have had a bit more to say. I commend her for her efforts in this area, and I am very happy to speak to her directly at any time on any concern she has. I hope that she is reassured that I have said that we will be bringing in an independent expert in sexual harassment to be a special adviser to the working party for our subsequent meetings.

The hon. Lady raises some specific “what ifs”. As this is a working party that has not yet completely set out the parameters of who will be able access it, I do not want to make decisions on behalf of my colleagues on the working party, but we will absolutely take away every one of her “what ifs” and will make decisions and announcements as soon as we can.

**Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con):** I commend the Leader of the House on the progress made so far and her statement, and the work of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in all this. It is important that we get on with it, that we have this great leadership from the top and that we work cross-party. I fully support the comments of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), which I will not repeat because I completely agree with her.

We accept that this is going to be very complicated, but there are some simple principles that must underpin it. For example, first, this independent system could apply to all passholders. Secondly, there must be sanctions somewhere along the line, and everybody must sign up to the system. Thirdly, as an underlying principle, it must confer rights, duties and responsibilities on all workers in this place just like workers in any other place.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and think I can give her reassurance on each of her points. The complaints and grievance procedure will include all passholders, as the working party has accepted. It will also ensure that people are very clear about rights and responsibilities, and that they all have a duty to abide by the rules as set out.

**Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green):** I welcome the positive response from the Leader of the House to the proposal I made, along with others, for this specialist in ending sexual violence to be a full member and adviser of the working group.

Does the Leader of the House support introducing a separate and named policy on sexual harassment? It is vital that we do not simply try to reuse an existing anti-bullying policy, which is essentially the respect policy, with its focus on things like mediation. Instead, we need a named sexual harassment policy, which will be more appropriate. Will the Leader of the House commit to looking to change the culture of this place, as well as the structures, and therefore look at issues like the consent training for MPs?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I commend the hon. Lady: she did first raise the issue of having a specialist adviser on sexual harassment, and I agree that that is important. I point out, however, that the House’s respect policy does deal with sexual harassment. It might not do so to her satisfaction, but for the purpose of clarity I should say that the helpline would include advice and guidance to

individuals who wanted to complain of sexual harassment. I am, however, absolutely open to her suggestion that there should be a separately named policy on sexual harassment, which will be a matter for the working party to consider.

**Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con):** I fully support and congratulate my right hon. Friend on acting so speedily and working in a cross-party manner to get this situation reconciled, and I fully support everything that has been said. I agree that there is a real issue about separating sexual harassment from other charges and think that will have to be looked at separately.

I have two points to make, however, in observation. First, the parties keep on stating that they must have their own party procedures. There is, however, a real issue here. What we get is parties acting, by, for instance, suspending the whip from an MP, but they are still an MP and carry on with duties and responsibilities here in the House. How swift and co-located can the process be with what goes on in the House in terms of investigations? MPs stand accused, and the longer this goes on, the more difficult it becomes for them to do their job, or should they be doing their job at all? I ask my right hon. Friend to look carefully at that, because if there is a false charge, we need to get that cleared up quickly. The dichotomy between an MP having a suspended party membership but still working as an MP could end up being the problem.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My right hon. Friend raises an important point, which the working party has acknowledged needs to be resolved. He is right that if somebody stands accused, it is difficult to be clear how to proceed where a party procedure might make a decision to take action on the whip and there is an ongoing grievance or, indeed, a criminal procedure in another area in terms of either the police or this grievance and complaints procedure. My right hon. Friend therefore raises an important point, which the working party will look at, but we do not as yet have the answer.

**Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op):** I welcome the progress made on this issue on all sides, but the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and my constituency neighbour the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) have hit upon the elephant in the room. What will the sanctions be if somebody is found to have behaved inappropriately in a workplace—to have sexually harassed a member of staff, a journalist, or another MP? In the Leader of the House’s statement in response to the urgent question on 30 October, she suggested that a member of staff who had been found to have behaved in that way would lose their job. As the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green pointed out, suspending the whip means somebody could still be in Parliament and constituents would be expected to speak to them. So can the Leader of the House confirm that the working party is looking at the concept of recall as a way to resolve this issue?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady reiterates the point made by my right hon. Friends the Members for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) and for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry). Sanctions are absolutely integral

to this, and they are within the scope of the working party, but as I have made clear, these are early days. We will be taking advice from a number of different expert groups who will inform the decisions that the working group takes, but I want to assure her that the subject of sanctions is absolutely within scope for resolution by the working party.

**Jo Churchill** (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I would like to add my voice in support of the strong lead shown by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House and of the cross-party working that has gone on so far. I would like to raise two brief points. First, I welcome the fact that Mr Speaker has written to all members of staff, but as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) said, there is a much broader picture here. What other methods are being considered to ensure that the helpline is known to people? Perhaps it could be advertised on the back of lavatory doors, for example, so that others who come to work here, not necessarily on a full pass, know how to access help. Secondly, will the Leader of the House think about a suggestion from a member of my staff, which was put through her office, that we should have a staff Select Committee? Such a Committee could raise issues and produce reports that we could then consider. There are many people who do not have a voice here except through the conduit of ourselves, and we already know about some of the problems associated with that process.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I thank my hon. Friend for making those two specific suggestions. She asked about the notification of the expansion of the helpline services. I know that Mr Speaker has asked that an email should go out from the Clerks of both Houses today, and I think that it has already been sent. It contains specific advice on the alternatives available to people who wish to make a complaint. My hon. Friend has suggested posting helpline information on the backs of lavatory doors, and I think that that is a very good idea. My office has contacted the communications team in the Clerk's office to suggest ways in which we could further ensure that people are aware of the helpline. She also suggested establishing a staff Select Committee. I am delighted that we have representatives of MAPSA and Unite actively on the working party, and I am sure that we will want to consider how staff can continue to be involved in the review of the system.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): As warmly as I feel towards the Leader of the House's efforts in this area, I think that the composition of the working party is not right. It is heavily overloaded with MPs and with the hierarchy within the political parties as well. One of the really big issues here is how very young, junior members of staff feel when they are being bullied or sexually harassed by someone who holds their life or their career in the balance because of the flow of patronage in Parliament. I note that there are no lesbian or gay members of the working party, despite the fact that issues can arise if a young man or woman wants to make an allegation about their boss that could in effect involve outing themselves or the person concerned. I hope that the Leader of the House will look again at the composition of the working party. However, my biggest anxiety of all is that we should have justice for both sides. If we just have trial by the newspapers, or trial by

the front page, that is not justice for the people who feel that they have been abused and want to make allegations; nor does it provide justice for those at the other end. I remember, in 2003, a journalist from *The Mail on Sunday* coming up to me in the Strangers bar and saying, "We're all taking bets on when you'll commit suicide. I hope it will be before Christmas."

**Andrea Leadsom:** Gosh, I am so sorry to hear that. I really sympathise with the hon. Gentleman on that last point. That is really, truly appalling. We all recognise the challenge of living in the public eye, and allegations that are either spurious, malicious or designed to hurt are often made against individuals. That is not right. We are seeking to provide justice for those who work here at all levels, whether they are young and extremely inexperienced or have been here for a long time, whether they are LGBT+ or straight, and whatever their race or ethnic background. We are seeking to ensure that there is justice for all. The hon. Gentleman has raised some important points. As I have said, I am pleased that we have two members of staff who represent MAPSA and Unite on the working party, but we will also be hearing from individual members of staff, either in person or in writing if they do not want to come forward in person. We will be seeking to obtain the broadest possible amount of information from those who work here to ensure that we make the right decisions.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I urge my right hon. Friend to ensure that there is a clear separation in this process between, on the one hand, the provision of training and advice for members of staff and MPs and, on the other, providing a safe space where people can report allegations. If the same people are involved in both processes, there is a huge risk that allegations will not be taken seriously and will not be advanced. We need to adopt best practice across both Houses, but we also need to give staff the opportunity to report abuses.

**Andrea Leadsom:** Yes, I think I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. The working party is absolutely clear that we will be establishing an independent grievance and complaints procedure that will be free of interference by political parties, by individual Members or by individuals who work here in any sense. It will be independent and confidential, and it will be able to take specific action to support individuals right the way through a grievance procedure and up to the final sanction, whatever that might be. I can give my hon. Friend that absolute assurance. On his other point about training and advice for those who employ people here, or indeed for those who feel they might have a grievance and want to take advice on it, I can tell him that the working party is committed to looking at and making decisions on those items. However, it is not intended that the training and advice should form part of the grievance and complaints procedure. We recognise the need for those things, but we do not believe that they should form any part of the independent complaints procedure.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I would like to associate myself with the comments made by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). The statement shows that there will be eight members of the working group representing employers and only two representing staff. Will the Leader of the House consider appointing

[Chris Stephens]

a representative from the National Union of Journalists, which has a recognition agreement with the Scottish National party, and one from the Public and Commercial Services union, which represents House staff, so that they, too, can have access to this body? Their experiences and requirements might be different. Can she also assure me that trade union representatives will be able to phone the hotline on behalf of a member of staff?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I would like to assure all Members that the working party has already agreed on a number of individuals and organisations from which we want to hear advice and views. There will be a big emphasis on hearing from staff and staff representatives, and indeed from the unions. I know that the NUJ is one of those that we wish to hear from. The people sitting on the working party taking evidence include the two staff members representing MAPSA and Unite. At the same time, we are determined to hear from a wide range of staff with different experiences, at different ages and stages of their lives and coming from different angles and career profiles within Parliament, as well as from the organisations that represent them.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): I, too, welcome the swift work that has gone on in this area. It is essential that we bring about positive change in relation to sexual harassment and bullying and, particularly, to the issues of confidentiality and trial by media that the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) mentioned. It is essential that we tackle that, and I totally agree with the idea of getting someone from the NUJ on the working party. I also want to raise the issue of suspension. We need a framework in place for when people have been suspended to inform them what they have been suspended for and how long the suspension is to last. I have heard examples of people being harassed and harangued while suspended, and not really knowing why they have been suspended. They can also be subjected to terrible abuse from outside, and we really need to deal with that. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that we will put in place a framework that is in line with those of other businesses up and down the country? Up to now, we have had no such framework operating in this place.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend raises several different issues. One of the challenges is that Members of Parliament employ their own staff directly. Unlike large businesses in other parts of the economy, we do not have a big official corporate structure to draw upon, and the working party will seek to address that challenge.

On party suspensions, as I said to other Members, party procedures will continue to be available, and parties will update and have updated their procedures to ensure that they address issues for local councillors, activists, volunteers, MEPs and so on. The working party will need to examine carefully what happens when an independent—hence confidential—grievance and complaints procedure draws a certain conclusion that may have implications for party procedures. The working party will consider that, but it is still early days, and we will come back to the House with more updates as soon as we can.

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House confirm that the helpline will be available not just to those who work in Parliament, but to everyone who works for an MP, such as non-pass holders, those working in constituency offices and, importantly, those who do not have access to parliamentary emails?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I can give the hon. Lady that reassurance.

**Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I warmly welcome the Leader of the House's work on this matter and her statement this morning, but part of the difficulty, especially over the past few weeks, lies with discerning the difference between the serious cases that must, should and can be dealt with and the spurious, fictitious and plain wrong allegations that must be weeded out and that, quite frankly, detract from the other serious cases. I have two specific questions. First, the Leader of the House mentioned fairness, including fairness to Members. Is it not a matter of fairness and natural justice—this affects parties on both sides of the House—that a Member who has received an allegation against them should know the basis of the allegation? Secondly, does she agree that any grievance and complaints procedure must be truly independent of any one political party?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. For the sake of clarity, I have allowed the hon. Gentleman two questions on this occasion, but one question is sufficient on an occasion such as this.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I absolutely share my hon. Friend's concern about the spurious, wrong, malicious and appalling accusations that have been made against some Members, causing considerable upset and hurt. Right across the House, we have concern for those in public life who are accused unfairly. On natural justice and fairness, I agree that every attempt to consider allegations against particular Members or members of staff must be treated in a completely fair and, as far as possible, transparent way. He asks for equal treatment across all parties and for all members of staff, and I completely agree with that principle. The working party will certainly seek to ensure that we have an equal, transparent and fair grievance system.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I thank all the Members and anyone else who will sit on this working party. It is a considerable time commitment, so I am very grateful. Many of us have short-term team members—shadows, work experience placements, interns—who are often not here long enough to get a pass. They can be young and are often inexperienced, so will the Leader of the House assure me that whatever is put in place will consider them, too? In the few short months that I have been here, I have found that some HR matters can be slow, so the induction processes that we put in place should be nimble so that all are protected.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her thanks to the members of the working party, which certainly is a time commitment. All the Members involved and our colleagues from MAPSA and Unite are working hard on it, so I echo her thanks to them. She asks about

those who are here on short-term placements, and it is intended that those individuals would also be able to access the grievance procedure.

**Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab):** I am sure that the Leader of the House will agree that by the time an allegation is made, we have potentially already failed employees. Will she reassure that House that the system will not just be reactive and respond to allegations, but engage and prevent potential incidents from happening in the first place? Every other employee under a good employer enjoys that privilege in the workplace. Can people who work here say the same?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman is exactly right and raises an important point. When a complaint has been made, something has already failed. The working party hopes that the creation of a new system of complaints will by its very existence change the culture in this place. I reiterate that we do have examples of good employers and teams that work extremely well right across the parliamentary estate. Many MPs, peers, chiefs of staff, and senior parliamentary assistants are very good employers and treat their staff with the utmost respect. Nevertheless, he is right to point out that we need to change the culture. By providing proper support for employment matters, which is the intention of the working party, by offering proper training to those who employ staff, and by creating a proper grievance procedure, I hope and expect that we will also change the culture and significantly reduce the number of complaints that need to be made.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** The last word is left to Rupa Huq.

**Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab):** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am encouraged to hear that the new system will apply to all 4,000 workers who keep the parliamentary estate going, many of whom are my constituents. There is deep concern among the tour guides that sweeping changes to their terms and conditions, which they feel are being foisted upon them, will rationalise many of them out of existence. Will the Leader of the House assure me that none of those who are dedicated to this vital work of the House will lose their jobs? Will she also meet PCS, MAPSA and Unite to allay those concerns?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am glad that the hon. Lady has raised that point. I reassure her that House staff already have their own well-established grievance procedures, which have been in place for some time, and that will not change. They will continue to be supported by and subject to House staff procedures. I cannot envisage a scenario in which any of their roles would be changed or affected by what we are seeking to do for non-House staff, so I hope I can totally reassure on that. If she wants to talk to me or the Clerk of the House of Commons about that, I think we can clarify her concerns. We certainly intend to hear from all those who wish to offer their views, so if PCS wants to provide a written submission, to see me separately or to appear before the working party, I am sure that we would be happy to hear from it.

## Points of Order

12.48 pm

**Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD):** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. At Work and Pensions questions on Monday, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), stated in response to my question about the collapse of AEA Technology and its pension scheme that my concerns about mis-selling and the advice given by the Government Actuary's Department in 1996 had been specifically dealt with by his predecessors in debates in March 2015 and October 2016. Having looked at those debates in *Hansard*, I am sorry to say that he was simply incorrect.

I have written to the Minister, I have asked him for a meeting with my constituents, and I have asked parliamentary questions. As you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am a new Member, and I feel like I have reached a brick wall, so will you please advise what I can do next, so that not just my constituents but constituents represented by parties of all colours can seek redress on this important matter?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** I thank the hon. Lady for giving notice to Mr Speaker of her intention to raise this point of order.

First, I would have the hon. Lady reflect on whether she has received an answer to any of the questions she asked and how long she has waited for that answer. I take it from her demeanour that she has waited longer than she thinks reasonable, so I say to her that what Ministers and other Members say in this House is, of course, a matter of their individual responsibility and not a matter for the Chair. She has raised the point, and if a Minister feels that his or her response has been inaccurate, I am sure that that Minister would consider taking steps to correct the record, but that of course is up to the Minister.

The hon. Lady also asks for advice on how to pursue the matter further, and a number of avenues are open to her. I would advise her that consulting the Table Office on what might be the most effective course of action would be a good idea.

**Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP):** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance. Yesterday at Prime Minister's questions I raised the plight of cancer patients, some of whom are dying as they wait for their universal credit payment, and the issue of terminally ill people having to self-declare as dying when applying for universal credit, even though they might not want to do so.

My question was not specific to Scotland, because these matters apply across the UK, yet the Prime Minister suggested that the Scottish Government could use powers to change these things. Universal credit powers are not devolved to Scotland. It is not acceptable to abdicate responsibility for such UK Government matters—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. I have to stop the hon. Gentleman because a point of order is a short point, not a speech, and we are about to have a debate on the very matter he is raising. I appreciate that he wants to raise this as a point of order, but, as I said in

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

answer to the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) not a minute ago, what a Minister says in this place, and of course that includes the Prime Minister, is a matter for them. Whether or not a fact is correct is a matter for debate, and I am quite sure the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) will have an opportunity, hopefully within the next couple of hours, to make his points of debate in the Chamber, and they will be listened to by the Minister on duty.

**Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab):** Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. We hope to get on to the debate, and we will all be noting whether the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) stays in his place, even if called last in the debate, to register his views.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Just as what Ministers say is not a matter for me, nor is it a matter for me whether the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) stays in his place.

## Backbench Business

### Universal Credit Roll-out

12.53 pm

**Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab):** I beg to move,

That this House notes the First Report of the Work and Pensions Committee, Session 2017-19, Universal Credit: the six week wait, HC 336; and calls on the Government to reduce the standard initial wait for a first Universal Credit payment to one month.

Some of us would not wish to use “roll-out” as an appropriate name for what is happening to universal credit in our constituencies. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the opportunity to debate this important topic, which affects a growing number of constituents. For my constituents, the horror of the full roll-out of universal credit happened yesterday.

I begin by confessing my inadequacies. When we debate in this great place I am sure most, if not all, of us reflect on how we simply do not have the language to match the task of presenting to the nation, through this Chamber, what is happening. This is the most important debate I have participated in during my nearly 40 years as the Member of Parliament for Birkenhead. I have never felt more acutely the inadequacy of the language I have to try to tell the House of the horror that is now happening to a growing number of my constituents under this so-called welfare reform programme.

So long as I do not get lots of interventions, as I did last Tuesday, I promise to speak briefly on five brief themes: first, the horrors under the existing roll-out of universal credit, before the full roll-out; secondly, the organised chaos that now presents itself in my constituency; thirdly, the national impact of what will be a growing crash and smash in many decent, honourable people’s lives; fourthly, the one reform on which all members of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions agree—this will not be our only report, but given the evidence, and we want to report to the House on the evidence, not on what we think or feel, the biggest change the Government could make is to reduce the initial wait from six weeks to four weeks—and finally, the long-term reforms.

When I saw the Minister at the coffee machine yesterday and he kindly told me that he would reply to the debate, I said that I had already asked the question four times. I am sorry that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is not here today, because he has no more important task. However much affection we have for the Minister of State for the seriousness with which he has gone about his career in this House, this issue is of such national importance that for the Secretary of State not to be here says something pretty big.

I have now asked the question five times. The Secretary of State tells me, “Go back home and say it’s all hunky-dory. You don’t have to worry. It’s all going to be rolled out fine.” And I say, “The food bank says we need 15 tonnes more food.” Who are we to believe?

This case began some time ago, but a person who is involved turned to their MP for help yesterday, the day of the full roll-out. It is an historical case of a gentleman who had waited and waited for an operation at our local hospital. That operation took place at the same time as he was told to turn up for an interview at our Jobcentre Plus. He was sanctioned. A friend reported

yesterday that this constituent of mine is now homeless and, while homeless, struggling to recover from the surgery.

I will now give five examples of the horrors that are happening in Birkenhead under the existing system. We were told the system would be simplified and manageable. These five cases have come into one MP's surgery. I do not want to speak for terribly long, but I could raise yards of cases—we could all raise yards of cases—of what is actually happening to our constituents.

Constituent No. 1 made three applications online. When they finally got through, they were told that no application had been received. They were paid six weeks after the third application. The constituent has three children to feed, and they were hungry.

Constituent No. 2 had twice attempted to apply online, and twice the application had been lost. They waited a further eight weeks before receiving money. They were hungry.

Constituent No. 3, who has a four-year-old daughter, waited two months for universal credit to be processed and tried the hotline six times, but was told that a new system was in place—it took several days before they phoned her back. She was then told, “No claim could be found.” Wow! Her payment date was pushed back by a further 11 days. My constituent and her daughter went hungry.

**Anna Soubry** (Broxtowe) (Con): These are heartbreaking and unacceptable accounts, but I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman can help me. When I met the citizens advice bureau in Broxtowe, where we had UC being rolled out in July, I was told that it is now making the arrangements with all relevant authorities so that these very examples do not exist. My question to the right hon. Gentleman is: did these constituents come to him at the end of this ghastly process or earlier? If they had come earlier, they would find that we as MPs all have exactly the access to speed it up. Does he agree that we should be doing this now before it comes out in our areas?

**Frank Field:** I could not agree more, although I have been here a little longer than the right hon. Lady and I never thought that as an MP I would be speaking like this, about this, with my job being adapted in this way. Of course we have had summits, and we are continuing to have them, bringing all the people together, including Jobcentre Plus, to try to prevent these things from happening. Despite those efforts, these are the cases of horror that are resulting and that I am presenting to the House.

Constituent No. 4 waited 12 months for universal credit. The Secretary of State, bless him, not here today, admitted that some error had occurred. My constituent is sinking in debt, despite the role of citizens advice bureaux, MPs, food banks, and getting welfare rights advisers in—despite all that. Constituent No. 5 was migrated from housing benefit to UC, with their housing benefit stopped immediately. They then waited seven weeks for UC, but when it came there was no housing component. Again, this constituent risks being evicted.

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful case. I have already been contacted by constituents terrified about what

they are going to do because they have rent arrears, and they know that if those hit £1,000 they will face eviction procedures and that any delay in getting their payments means they will hit that £1,000 mark. So even when the system works perfectly, the inherent delays push these people into debt and eviction, which will cost us all more.

**Frank Field:** I could not agree more. We will come on to discuss, briefly, I hope, the reforms we want and will push for. I will certainly do that, as perhaps others will. We will review these things in our Select Committee. We must base this on evidence, but the evidence is mounting up.

**Peter Kyle** (Hove) (Lab): I do not know whether my right hon. Friend has noticed that *The Times* reports today that property companies are now doing pre-emptive evictions of tenants who are being moved to UC. [Interruption.] *The Times* is reporting this today; it is actually happening on the frontline. Will he say a few words about the impact this will have on already vulnerable claimants of UC?

**Frank Field:** Both those statements made by my hon. Friends from east London and Hove, on the coast, are true, and I am sure they will try to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I move on to the theme of organised chaos. Even if we are working with CABs, every Tom, Dick and Harry organisation seems now to be embedded in the system. Jobcentre officials say that even when the system is up and running, as it is in Birkenhead, claims are closed down in error and it takes several months to rebuild them. There is no money during the rebuilding—

**Conor McGinn** (St Helens North) (Lab) *rose—*

**Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab) *rose—*

**Frank Field:** I am anxious that everybody gets in, so may I move on? I have real affection for people who have fought the battle hard on this, but I wish to pursue the matter. Four constituents of mine have had their claims closed down, with the only too imaginable consequences of what it has meant for their lives. The landlord of one of them has said, “I do not want to evict the tenant, however I might be left with no choice.” That tenant has said, “I am behind with not only my rent, but my council tax. All I've got to live off is child benefit. The school has been so worried about the welfare of my son that my sister offered to take him in to her household so that he was not taken into care.”

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) *rose—*

**Frank Field:** I might give way a little later, but I want everybody to have a chance to speak.

Let us examine how sanctions apply in this system. I wish to give one example of a lad who, after huge difficulty, got a part-time job. We must consider the pride that came with that job; he was walking out in the morning knowing that at end of the week he was going to bring a wage packet back. I point out that this is at the end of the week, Minister, not the end of four weeks or six. There was a transformation in him, but the jobcentre decided that he was not trying hard enough to

[Frank Field]

get a better job, so they sanctioned him and took his money away. He then could not exist on the money from his job. He now has no money and is well on his way to destitution.

So my third theme is: what is the national impact of this slow motion crash for us, but high-speed crash for our constituents? What has the Trussell Trust told us about the impact around the country of this roll-out of universal credit? We must remember that the Trussell Trust is the “trade union”, so to speak, of only half our food banks. It reports that it needs 1,500 additional tonnes of food for the coming year in any case, but that it will need an additional 2,000 tonnes to take on the consequences now of UC. As I have said, in Birkenhead we will need 15 tonnes of food in the coming year. We knew that this, for us, evolving slow crash, coming up over weeks, was going to happen, but in Birkenhead it actually began yesterday.

That is why the Select Committee, of one mind, on the evidence that it received, said that the most important thing the Government could do, of the many things it could do—this was the one thing that stood out from our evidence and we wanted them to do it as quickly as possible—was to reduce the wait from a maximum of six weeks to a maximum of four weeks. The first 133 submissions to the Select Committee told us that the six-week wait is the main force pushing people to having no food, risking everything and the brink of destitution. It is not a surprise, is it, Minister, given that the data from your old Department, the Treasury, tell us that more than half of low-income and middle-income families have no savings at all to fall back on? Two thirds of us have less than a month’s savings to tide us over a crisis.

Let us consider the very idea that these families—the most vulnerable people that we have the honour to represent in this House—can wait for six weeks. In the cold light of day, one wonders how any decent set of people—[*Interruption.*] The great architect of this reform is not in this place, although he was here earlier—I refer to the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith). Could he ever have really wanted this result for this reform? I hope he is going to come back and tell us that when he failed to fend off cuts from the previous Chancellor of the Exchequer he could never have envisaged that this reform of noble intent should end in these personal nightmares for our constituents.

The Select Committee does not yet have evidence on this—we may get the evidence to persuade us to publish a united report—but for me there seem to be five obvious reforms that we need to build into universal credit, in addition to that four-week wait. First, if Scotland can have two-weekly payments, why cannot England? Northern Ireland is going to get payments every two weeks; why cannot Wales? I thank Scotland for negotiating a subcontracted agreement to show that what was thought to be impossible is indeed possible, once due pressure is applied. I offer huge thanks for that.

Secondly, we want rents to be paid directly to landlords, if people wish.

Thirdly, we want the DWP automatically to tell local authorities and housing associations that their tenants will be pushed into debt. I do not think that is our or the citizens advice bureaux’ job; it is the Department’s job.

Fourthly, under the current system babies and toddlers are going without Healthy Start vouchers and children are going without free school meals because the data that was previously held separately and could be given to local authorities is now held in the universal credit system and not given to local authorities. Can that terrible nonsense please come to an end?

Lastly, my colleagues and I had a fight when the Government removed from the statute book the duty of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to promote claimants’ welfare. The Government said that it was not necessary and that they were tidying up the statute book—“We’re all in favour. Who could possibly be against promoting the welfare of claimants?” My argument was that if it is so unnecessary, let us just leave it on the statute book, in case. The current sanctions policy could never, ever have worked if that duty on the Secretary of State had existed, because the Secretary of State delegates to every person who works in DWP offices, and they would have to carry out that discretion on the Secretary of State’s behalf.

The House knows that I was as tough as old boots on the need for sanctions—people should have to abide by the rules—but the idea that we have sanctions without anybody in the office being able to exercise discretion is appalling. Imagine being an officer to whom somebody says, “You can ring the hospital and find I was actually on the operating table when you wanted me here for an interview. Please don’t sanction me!”, but the sanction is applied automatically because there is no discretion. That should end.

I plead with the unbelievably decent Minister for Employment: I want those mutterings of his—when he says that he is appalled, that this does not need to happen and that he can explain why it is not going to happen—to be on the record when he replies. I also ask this of Ministers on the Treasury Bench for the fifth time: the Government tell me that the roll-out of universal credit in Birkenhead is going hunky-dory—that all the things I have tried to represent and all the pleas from the food bank to raise 15 tonnes more food is scaremongering—so will the Minister say whether the Government are still as confident as they were when I first asked the question many months ahead of the roll-out? Or should I go home and roll up my sleeves with those at the food bank who are trying to collect 15 tonnes more food to prevent families from being engulfed, this Christmas and beyond, by hunger of undue proportions? This is a national scandal that the Government could stop. Will they stop it, please?

**Several hon. Members** rose—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. I am delighted to call to make his maiden speech Mr David Duguid.

1.14 pm

**David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—and thanks for pronouncing my name so well!

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) on securing this debate and welcome this opportunity to make my maiden speech. It is quite

timely, because in just the past couple of weeks I have started engaging with my local Citizens Advice office and jobcentres on this very subject in preparation for the roll-out of universal credit in my Banff and Buchan constituency in March, in much the same way as my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) described earlier.

I am proud and honoured to have been elected by the people of Banff and Buchan to represent them in this place. I totally agree with my hon. Friends who have spoken before me about the beauty of their Scottish constituencies. However, as I am the last Scottish Conservative to deliver my maiden speech, I can now say definitively that Banff and Buchan is indeed the most beautiful.

I wish to take this opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor, Dr Eilidh Whiteford. Eilidh represented Banff and Buchan in this House for seven years. She worked hard for her constituents, as well as here in Parliament. Earlier this year, she became the first Scottish National party Member of Parliament to have a private Member's Bill passed into statute. Her Bill enhanced protection for victims of domestic abuse in line with the Istanbul convention. I am sure that the whole House will join me in thanking Eilidh for her contribution and wishing her well in the future.

The election results in June made it clear to me and my colleagues from the north-east of Scotland that the people there do not want another independence referendum. On top of that, regardless of how they voted in the EU referendum—for Members' information, my constituency did vote to leave the European Union—the electorate in Banff and Buchan made it clear that they wanted the Government to get on and deliver Brexit. I committed to do all I could to support and influence the Government in getting the best possible Brexit deal for Scotland.

Leaving the EU presents great opportunities for the two main industries that define my constituency: fishing and farming. As we leave the EU, we will leave the common fisheries policy and, as we do so, we will regain complete control over access to our fishing waters out to 200 nautical miles or the median between two countries. In Banff and Buchan, we have two of the largest fishing ports in Europe: Peterhead and Fraserburgh. Peterhead is also a major port supplying the North sea oil and gas industry as well as, more recently, offshore wind projects. Seafood processing is a major industry in my constituency, with our produce exported across the UK, Europe and beyond, including to North America and Australia.

The other key industry in my constituency is of course agriculture. I am bound to say that Banff and Buchan has some of the best grazing land available, and that helps to produce some of the best Scotch beef and lamb. Of course, the topic of food and drink in Scotland cannot pass without a mention of Scotch whisky. Although there are relatively few distilleries in Banff and Buchan, much of the best malting barley is grown there.

Many of my constituents and others across the north-east of Scotland are employed, as I was for the previous 25 years, in the oil and gas industry. Workers from across north-east Scotland commute to Aberdeen or work offshore. Many work in related engineering, manufacturing and service businesses located around the north-east, not just in Aberdeen. Many of those businesses were started by local entrepreneurs, are still family owned and have grown into some of the biggest employers in

the area. Indeed, some have won UK awards for their focus on the training and development of young people and apprentices.

I find it incredible that a constituency that is home to so many entrepreneurs and small and medium-sized businesses, and that contributes so greatly to the food and drink and energy sectors, has one of the slowest average broadband speeds in the country. The average download speed across Banff and Buchan of 6 megabits per second can only be dreamed of by many of my constituents who are struggling to get speeds of 1 or 2 megabits per second, if they get any at all. That lack of connectivity hampers business growth and discourages people from coming to live in the area, so one of my top priorities is to pressure Governments on both sides of the border to work towards delivering an acceptable minimum broadband performance across rural Banff and Buchan, not just in the towns.

We live in an age when more and more of our services are provided online. However, while those online services increasingly become the norm, including when applying for universal credit, many people still do not have adequate access to broadband internet. That is simply unacceptable. A decent broadband service is rapidly becoming essential for every business, school, hospital and household, wherever they may be located.

Another growth opportunity in Banff and Buchan is tourism. Our coast across the north-east of Scotland is like no other on the British Isles. Rugged cliffs are home to a wealth of birdlife, including Scotland's only mainland gannet colony at Troup Head.

**Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con):** We are all coming to visit.

**David Duguid:** You are all most welcome.

Our shoreline is regularly visited by porpoises and dolphins, and even the occasional humpback or killer whale.

In summary, Banff and Buchan is a great place to live in and to visit. However, the standard of some of our public services, particularly education and health, has taken a bit of a hit in recent years under a SNP Government who are obsessed with pursuing independence at any cost.

Our town centres are much in need of regeneration, with many shops and offices lying empty, particularly in coastal areas. For that reason, I decided to locate my constituency office in the old county town of Banff.

In conclusion, like Opposition Members, I welcome the opportunity to have strong voices—Scottish voices—in this House. With that said, I am especially glad to be one of the 12 additional Scottish Conservative voices on the Government Benches.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. It will be obvious to the House that a great many people wish to speak. We have limited time, so there will be an immediate time limit of six minutes.

1.21 pm

**Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) on a really powerful maiden speech.

[Mr Steve Reed]

He made a good case for getting up to visit Banff and Buchan, so I will be booking a trip there as soon as possible to taste the whisky and see the wildlife that he talked about. He is a wonderful advocate for the area.

The hon. Gentleman also looked incredibly confident and relaxed as he gave his speech. I think back to how nervous I felt when I gave my maiden speech, but he made his like an old pro—[*Interruption.*] Seasoned might be a better term. We can look forward to many more excellent contributions from him and I wish him very well in his career in this House.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who is no longer in the Chamber, for securing this important debate. Croydon was one of the first boroughs to experience the roll out of universal credit, so we have had longer to see what a total and utter disaster it is. A long and growing stream of people have come to my office, many of whom have been close to tears because universal credit has forced them into debt. It has made it harder for them to stay in work and left many of them facing eviction for rent arrears.

Our local council has had to spend £3 million so far to stop people from being evicted because of late rent payments. Local food banks are running out of food because of the vast increase in demand from people who are going hungry because of what the Government's scheme has done to them. More than 1,000 tenants in Croydon have over three months' rent arrears and are at risk of losing their home because of the failures of universal credit.

**Stephen Timms:** Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the problems—it is certainly not the only one—although it is denied by Ministers, is the fact that the IT system for universal credit is not yet working properly?

**Mr Reed:** I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. I cannot for the life of me understand why the Government insist on ploughing ahead when it is quite clear that the IT system is not fit for purpose. They should pause the process and fix that before they inflict this damage on any more people.

According to my council's figures, a tenant on housing benefit—the legacy system—had an average rent account that was £42 in credit. Under universal credit, a tenant has an average balance of £722 in arrears. This is supposed to be a system that helps low-income families, but it is instead forcing them into debt and out of their homes.

I wish to share just a few short examples from my own casework, and I suspect that we will hear many, many more throughout the debate. One constituent told me that he had £1,400 of debt and two months' rent arrears because of errors with her universal credit. She had no money to buy food for her family or to heat her home.

A mother of five children was left waiting nine weeks for her first payment. She works part time and is desperate to keep working. She wants to do exactly what the Government tell her that she should be doing, but the new system has let her down and pushed her into debt.

A pregnant mother with two young children came to see me. She was not eating properly because of debt, which posed a serious risk to not only herself, but her

unborn child. She had no option but to take out several high-interest payday loans and has been threatened with eviction because of underpayments. It is outrageous to leave anyone in those circumstances, let alone a pregnant woman.

Severely disabled people face the particular problem that universal credit does not include a severe disability premium. Although the Work and Pensions Committee raised its concerns about precisely that earlier this year, as yet the Government have done absolutely nothing.

Under the current system, a person with severe disabilities in receipt of income-related employment and support allowance with a severe disability premium gets £172 a week. Under universal credit, that is cut to just £146 a week. I became aware of that when our citizens advice bureau referred to me the case of a claimant with severe mental ill health who was moved on to universal credit when he became liable for housing costs. The effect was that he lost more than £100 from his benefits to cover his living expenses, and he had no transitional protection because he had experienced a change of circumstances. When a person has so little income, financial loss on such a scale is utterly devastating.

Universal credit is an unmitigated disaster for hundreds of the most vulnerable people in Croydon North. If the roll-out continues before the system is fixed, those hundreds will become thousands. People just cannot cope. What kind of system penalises the poor, and forces people out of jobs and on to benefits and into food banks? The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the Minister for Employment must do what this House instructed them to do in a recent vote: pause and fix the system before it devastates any more lives.

1.27 pm

**Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I am grateful to be called so early in this debate. It is a pleasure to speak on this important matter. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) for his maiden speech. I agree with what the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) said about the speech, save in one respect: my hon. Friend gave the confident speech of a young professional. He paid generous tribute to his predecessor. I particularly appreciated his comments on broadband, and I look forward to campaigning alongside him to ensure that all of our rural areas have adequate access to broadband. I look forward to his further contributions in this place.

I am pleased that this is the third or fourth such debate that we have had in the past month, because it gives me the opportunity to reiterate my strong support for universal credit. Like most people on both sides of the House, I am firmly of the view that work should always pay. That is the principle that underlines universal credit. Government Members are passionate about ensuring that more people get into work, that they are supported into work and that, once they are there, they get on and get ever more work both in terms of hours and quality.

**Peter Kyle:** Does the hon. Gentleman remember the early days of when universal credit was first mooted? At that time, the Labour party was supportive of the concept, but said that universal credit needed to be rolled out over a period longer than one Parliament,

and that much more detailed piloting would be needed to get the system right. Those are the things that have gone wrong, and they are inflicting misery on our constituents.

**Michael Tomlinson:** I will come back to the Labour party's record on rolling out benefits in due course, but the hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I wish that Labour Members would speak up more loudly with their support for the principle behind universal credit, because at the moment it sounds like they are calling for not a delay or a pause, but a scrap. The Labour party has opposed every single benefit change that this Government have brought into effect, and the cost of its position would have been tens of billions of pounds. However, this is not about the money. More importantly, it is about the people, and universal credit is about encouraging people into work.

**Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab):** I am really pleased to hear that the hon. Gentleman is supporting universal credit, although he failed to vote in favour of it the other week. Would he also support a renewed project to study how universal credit supports people to get into work? The Department for Work and Pensions has delayed and denied an opportunity to review the original study to prove whether universal credit is still working, because lots of people expect that it is not.

**Michael Tomlinson:** Perhaps the Minister will respond to the hon. Gentleman's point in due course.

I chair the all-party group on youth employment, so I want to use any mechanism available to encourage young people—everyone, in fact—to get into work. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) could listen to my response, rather than just shaking his head and taking part in exchanges across the Chamber.

**Neil Coyle:** The Minister is chuntering, so I cannot hear the hon. Gentleman.

**Michael Tomlinson:** Forgive me; I will speak up. If the hon. Gentleman stops talking, however, he might be able to hear a little more easily. He is more than welcome to come along to the meetings of the all-party group. We met yesterday, which was the date on which the latest Office for National Statistics employment figures came out. We track those figures each month. It was pleasing to see that there are still record numbers for youth employment and record lows of young people who are out of work. The youth unemployment rate of 11.9% is in touching distance of the lowest ever figure on comparable records, and it is almost half the youth unemployment rate of over 22% in 2011, which followed the disastrous Labour Government.

**Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con):** Recent forecasts show that universal credit will create 400 jobs in every constituency across the country. Does my hon. Friend welcome that, as I do, given the great work that he is doing?

**Michael Tomlinson:** I warmly welcome it. I look forward to the time when we look back and say that universal credit has been a success. Now, do not get me

wrong. We are not trying to pretend that all is rosy and that there are no errors—quite the opposite. Government Members, as much as Opposition Members—well, certainly Government Members—want to ensure that universal credit works. I encourage the Minister, who will listen as I am sure he always does, to ensure that he is testing and learning, and that we are constantly improving the system.

I support any principle that encourages more people into work. In response to the intervention made by the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), I threatened to speak about the Labour party's record. The hon. Gentleman is just about to leave the Chamber, but it does not matter, as he can read this in *Hansard* tomorrow—*[Interruption.]* Ah, he has sat down. When the Labour party was in power, a member of my community told me that he had chosen not to take a job because it would not have been worth his while, due to the risk to his benefits and, therefore, to him. I do not blame him. He made a perfectly calculated, sensible and rational decision, but he chose not to take a job because of the Labour Government's policy.

**Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab):** If work incentives were so poor under Labour, perhaps the hon. Gentleman will explain why lone parent employment increased from 44% in 1994 to 57% when we left office.

**Michael Tomlinson:** The hon. Lady intervened on me during our last debate on this subject. It is always a pleasure to lock horns with her in a constructive fashion. The last time she challenged me, she said, "How about those young people in poverty?" I did not have the figures on poverty to hand at the time but, if the hon. Lady looks at them, she will see that there are 600,000 fewer people—I will check that figure—in absolute poverty this year. Under the old system, for the constituent I mentioned, it did not pay for him to go to work. Under universal credit, the principle should be that work always pays.

**Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab):** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Michael Tomlinson:** In one moment.

We remember the fiasco of tax credits, with £7.3 billion of overpayments, and we remember the misery that was caused. The hon. Member for Hove referred to the speed with which universal credit has been rolled out. Actually, the lesson to be learned is not to roll out a scheme in a big-bang fashion, as happened with tax credits, when £2.7 billion then had to be clawed back from the poorest and most vulnerable in society. I was a new Member of Parliament in 2015, when people were still feeling the repercussions of that old system.

**Peter Kyle:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Michael Tomlinson:** I will not. I only have a minute and a half left, and I do not get any more time.

The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) referred to two-weekly payments. Will the Minister tell us the number of people in employment who actually receive such payments? My suspicion is that it is a very low proportion, but I want the Minister to tackle that point directly, as he was asked the question by the right

[Michael Tomlinson]

hon. Gentleman. In particular, I want the Minister to continue to listen and learn, and to ensure that it always pays to be in work rather than on benefits.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. Just to help the situation, I will drop the speaking limit to five minutes because of the number of interventions. If people continue to intervene, which I do not want to stop, they must understand that they will go to the bottom of the list in order to ensure that those who have not spoken get their chance. That includes you, Helen Goodman.

1.35 pm

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) on his maiden speech. He is still to be persuaded on the merits of Scottish independence, and I look forward to debating them with him in the next few years. I thank him for paying a generous tribute to his predecessor, Eilidh Whiteford; I am sure that all Scottish National party Members appreciate that.

As a member of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, let me start by saying that Glasgow is a city where words often have more than one meaning, and in attempting to sum up this Government's approach to social security benefits and universal credit, I would use the word "ignorant". Now, Government Members may not agree with that characterisation. They may even point out that the architect of universal credit, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), made a point of visiting Easterhouse in Glasgow in 2002. But, of course, the Government are closing the jobcentre in Easterhouse this year.

**Anna Soubry:** I was a member of the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs when we discussed the situation of the Glasgow jobcentres. Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that Glasgow had somewhere in the region of 16 jobcentres and that the DWP's very excellent proposal—in fact, it was not radical enough, in my view—was to reduce that number to eight? We compared the number of jobcentres in comparable cities in other parts of the country that had comparable employment rates, and they often had two or three jobcentres, as opposed to eight.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order! Too long; far too long.

**Chris Stephens:** The evidence that was used by the Government to justify closing those jobcentres was based on information that did not exist. They were using Google Maps when they should have been using the First Bus app that would have told them that closing jobcentres means a complicated, multi-bus, hour-long journey from Easterhouse to Shettleston.

The Government were faced with all the evidence provided by Members in this place through debate and questions; they were faced with all the evidence provided to the Work and Pensions Committee by a wide range of people and organisations dealing with the impact of universal credit; and they were faced with a report from that Committee clearly outlining where the implementation is going seriously wrong. But even when faced with all

that information, the Government continue to argue a line that, in my city, we would call ignorant. When that word is used in Glasgow it does not mean someone who does not know all the facts, someone who does not know any better or someone who needs advice on how to act. No, ignorant—as in "pure dead ignorant"—means someone who knows all the facts and knows what should be done, but chooses to do whatever they want despite it being wrongheaded and damaging to others.

I fully expect, and we have already heard, the tired old Government line about the policy of universal credit as having been welcomed. It is even on the top line of the Work and Pensions Committee report that universal credit is a good idea in principle. But—this cannot be emphasised enough and the report clearly confirms this—it is the design and operation in practice that is deeply and utterly flawed.

Reports of a rethink or U-turn on the waiting time for universal credit were trailed in the media yesterday, but frankly do not seem to present as a clear commitment to reduce to the four weeks maximum. Oddly enough, there was some link between this story and next week's Budget. I can only assume what many of us have suspected, which is that universal credit is less to do with supporting people into employment and more to do with cutting the benefits bill, and that any changes are a Treasury call.

The Public and Commercial Services Union has clearly outlined how universal credit actually works, as opposed to the fantasy-island wishful thinking of the so-called reforms to the benefits system. The pressure on staff members is intense, with one in 10 who work directly with universal credit claims leaving—double what is considered normal. The DWP employs 30,000 fewer staff than in 2010. If the Government are meant to be in the job-creation business, that certainly does not appear to be in their own backyard—the civil service.

Jobcentre closures and lack of internet access, or digital exclusion, all put a severe strain on claimants and staff. I welcome the dropping of telephone call charges, not just because they are the result of campaigning against the telephone tax, but because they are an indication that someone somewhere recognises that something has to give.

The current situation is unsustainable. The roll-out has to be paused if there is to be any hope of making this work. As universal credit follows on from the implementation of personal independence payments, which inflicted real hardship and humiliation on many disabled people, it is hard not to join the dots and to work out that the Government view benefits as a budget problem to be solved by actively making claiming more difficult.

The changes to benefits are part of a cuts agenda. The budget for universal credit is nearly £3 billion a year less than the budget for the system it replaces. No wonder it has in-built delays to payments: every day that every pound that is rightly owed to claimants is held in Treasury accounts, the poorest and most vulnerable in society are subsidising Government expenditure, while offshore tax avoiders pay their accountants but not their taxes.

The Work and Pensions Committee report is the first in a series and is focused on the terrible impact the six-week wait has on claimants. It also identifies problems with advance payments, which start a claimant off in

debt—if they are not already in debt. There are also clear situations where housing associations do not know that their tenants are on universal credit, and I hope the Government will focus on that.

I am calling for the Government to cut the waiting time for universal credit and to pause the roll-out. Glasgow will be the last major city in the UK to be subject to the full service roll-out, but how many thousands of families, children and vulnerable people will have to suffer and starve before we get to that point? If a 10th of the resource that is put into chasing benefit fraud were put into chasing tax avoiders, how much more resource would we have so that we could truly support working people and enable people to work, rather than cutting off their lifelines?

1.41 pm

**Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), although I take issue with his claim to have the most beautiful seat in Scotland; indeed, I would take issue with the claim that he had the most beautiful seat in Aberdeenshire. Now that I know that that is where the gannets are coming from, perhaps he could do us all a favour in the southernmost part of the county and keep them up north. I would be very grateful indeed if he could do that.

This is the third time in four weeks that we have debated universal credit in this Chamber. That is not a bad thing. Indeed, this issue affects many of our constituents, and it is arguably the biggest reform to welfare since the Beveridge report in the 1940s, so it is right that we spend our time debating it.

I am incredibly lucky at this stage in my parliamentary career to serve on the Work and Pensions Committee, under the chairmanship of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), whose skill in chairing it is a lesson in how to drive a debate. I sit alongside some incredibly passionate and learned MPs from all persuasions. What unites us is the desire to get to the nub of some of the biggest problems and issues facing our welfare system, to get answers and to find out how we can make the system better for our constituents, who rely on it. I hope, and I think, that that comes through in the report.

We all, I hope, believe in universal credit, and we all will it to work. The first page of the report states:

“Universal Credit has great merits as an idea. It aims to...simplify an overcomplicated welfare system by combining six different benefits in one...improve incentives for people to start paid work or increase their hours”

and

“ease the move into work, partly by mirroring the world of work in its operation.”

The report goes on to say:

“Implemented properly, Universal Credit has the potential to have a genuinely transformative effect on the labour market and make a valuable contribution to reducing poverty.”

I, for one, believe that universal credit is working and can work.

As I have said before in the House, the “Universal Credit at Work” report found that 71% of people claiming universal credit found work within the first nine months of their claim—a rate 8% higher than that for the comparable jobseeker’s allowance. People claiming universal credit on the live service were three percentage points

more likely to be in work after three months than those claiming JSA and four percentage points more likely to be in work six months after starting their claim. These numbers look small, but actually signify many thousands of lives that are dramatically improved by this policy.

Out there and in here, however, there are genuine and serious concerns surrounding elements of the roll-out—specifically the six-week wait for the first payment, and it would be entirely remiss of us, as a Select Committee and as a House, to ignore those. The Committee heard and stated in the report we are debating that the six-week wait has been associated with increases in rent arrears, problem debt and food bank use. It urges the Government to aim—aim—to reduce the standard waiting time for a first universal credit payment to one month.

It would be entirely remiss of us not to acknowledge, however, that the Government have been proactive in trying to find solutions for those of our constituents who need help the most or who cannot wait till the end of the six-week period as it stands now. In October, in his speech to the Conservative party conference, the Secretary of State announced that the DWP would make advance payments of universal credit more readily available to those who needed them. As the report says, we were all impressed on our visit to London Bridge jobcentre by the ease and speed with which an advance payment could be granted.

This debate is not supposed to be about whether we should pause or stop the roll-out of universal credit, as other debates on this issue have been; it is supposed to be on the content of the report presented by the Work and Pensions Committee. I feel that the report is balanced and seeks to give recommendations to the Government, rather than unduly to criticise what we all want to be a successful roll-out of a transformational welfare benefit, and that is right. I believe that the Government are listening and are doing what we all, I think, want them to do—to press ahead cautiously, learning and evolving, testing and refining.

**Vicky Ford:** I thank my hon. Friend for listening on this issue, and I am listening hard because universal credit is soon to come to my constituency. I am pleased to hear him say that the advance payments help with the six-week gap. Has he looked at the repayment period for these advance payments, and is there enough flexibility in their repayment, especially for people who are challenged in getting back to work?

**Andrew Bowie:** I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I will be blunt and honest and say that I have not looked at that in great detail, but I will do so and get back to her.

I was saying that the Government are listening and should be doing what we want them to do, which is to press cautiously ahead with the roll-out, learning and evolving, testing and refining the system as it continues to deliver this important benefit to the people of the United Kingdom.

1.46 pm

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) on an excellent maiden speech. I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) on securing this debate.

[Melanie Onn]

At Prime Minister's questions yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition raised the issue of a letting agency in my constituency that has issued all its tenants with a notice of eviction, in anticipation of the universal credit roll-out beginning next month. It is effectively a pre-emptive notice of eviction, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), who is no longer in his place, mentioned in an intervention. That notice means that any constituent who falls into rent arrears as a result of the delays in their welfare payments can be evicted without notice. The roll-out of universal credit in my constituency is due on 13 December for all new claimants. Because of the issuing date of the notice, the earliest that people could find themselves at risk of eviction is mid-January. Because the notice has already been served, people could be evicted without notice from mid-January to mid-May, at which point the notice expires, and I assume the plan will then be to re-issue it. The constituent who first contacted me about this said she feels "utterly helpless" and "heart sick". This is an absolutely outrageous way to treat people.

**Vicky Ford:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Melanie Onn:** The notice will have left all those who received it stressed and worried for their futures.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) can ask to intervene, but she cannot remain on her feet.

**Melanie Onn:** I was really disappointed that the Prime Minister did not condemn that letter in the Chamber yesterday, and I invite the Minister to do that today. Rather than acknowledging the impact this policy is clearly having, she waxed and waned about the fact that she had not seen a copy of the letter. Well, I have the letter here, and I am very happy to hand it over to the Minister once I have finished my speech, so that he has a chance to read it for himself, if he has not done so already. The letter appears to be a blatant attempt to circumvent the laws passed in the Housing Act 1988 and the Deregulation Act 2015, which require two months' notice to be given to tenants before an eviction can be carried out.

**Vicky Ford:** I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. A number of us on the Conservative Benches would like to join her in condemning that letter, which we believe is illegal, and we would like to have a copy. Has she actually met the housing association to tell them that it is not legal?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. The letter is becoming quite contentious. I am sure that it can be passed to the Minister.

**Melanie Onn:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I need to make it absolutely clear that this is about the private rental sector; it is not about a housing association. Conservative Members may well feel that this is illegal and I know that one of them condemned the intervention that was made earlier about the fact that they believed this to be illegal. I received some completely unsolicited legal advice—lawyers in housing contacted me—to the effect that this is not illegal. It is

completely legitimate; nothing prohibits it. One of the big issues would be that even if it were illegal, many of these people would not have the capabilities to seek legal redress. That is a real issue.

**Frank Field:** It's immoral.

**Melanie Onn:** Despite the very clear moral questions around this action, I am advised that it remains a lawful way of operating. I have even had some indication that some landlords are issuing these notices at the outset of tenancies, which is really quite frightening—a much bigger issue than that which we are discussing here today. I really hope that the Government will look at closing this loophole in future. I am happy to share the information. It is online; it is on my Facebook page. People are very welcome to look at that.

The Government said that my Opposition colleagues and I were guilty of scaremongering when we warned that rolling out universal credit would lead to people going into debt or being evicted from their properties. Well, it is not just us who are making that claim; it is charities, councils and housing associations. It is the statistical evidence from the areas where universal credit has been piloted, and now it is the letting agencies, too. My local housing association, Shoreline Housing Partnership, has 182 tenants who have already gone on to universal credit. Of those, 145 are in rent arrears of an average of £400. That is 80% of them. When universal credit is fully rolled out, the housing association expects the total debt from tenants to increase to £2.2 million.

**Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab):** Does my hon. Friend agree that it would help if the Government were to extend the implied consent, so that third sector organisations such as housing associations, but more importantly citizens advice bureau and welfare advisers, could give support and advice to people on universal credit without first having to jump through dozens of hoops to speak with the universal credit managers?

**Melanie Onn:** I thank my hon. Friend. That is an excellent idea, which I hope the Minister will consider carefully and respond to.

My local housing association anticipates an increase in possession orders and evictions. It expects the condition of its properties to deteriorate as tenants opt to eat rather than heat. The Library estimates that more than 13,000 people living in Great Grimsby will be eligible for universal credit once it is fully implemented, so I am sure that everyone will understand that I am really concerned that people in my town will pay a heavy price if the system does not work.

The warnings against pushing ahead with this roll-out now are loud and clear. The Government cannot feign ignorance of what is likely to come. If they go ahead next month in my constituency as planned, they will knowingly be putting more people at risk of debt, eviction and homelessness, and that, for me, really sits at odds with their much-heralded and noisily launched Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, because it appears as though two areas of policy are at complete odds with each other. That is the test: which is more important to them? I am pleading with the Government today to listen, press pause on the roll-out and get this right before moving ahead.

1.53 pm

**Heidi Allen** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak in this important debate. My congratulations to the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid): may I have some dolphins for South Cambridgeshire, please? I am not sure where we would put them, but we would take great care of them. I also sincerely thank the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) for securing this debate via the Backbench Business Committee and for working so closely in cross-party partnership with me on an issue that is very important to us both.

Members, including Ministers, will know that I fully support universal credit and believe that, when it is fully implemented, it will be the most positive transformation of our benefit system in decades. As an employer, I remember only too well the weaknesses of the old system—the 16-hour cliff-edge that limited employees' ability to take on more hours, knowing they would be worse off. I was reminded of that in a conversation last week with a constituent. The full service universal credit system has not yet come to my local jobcentre in Cambridge. She does not want to take any more hours now because of that. What kind of a benefit trap is that? Surely, no one in the House can support a benefit system that actively discourages progression in work.

Universal credit will be different, and where the live service—the basic system for single, uncomplicated jobseekers—has been rolled out, it is different. We see more people moving into and upwards in work. However, it is without doubt the full service—that is, the full universal credit system which will support families, parents and those with caring responsibilities, health conditions and disabilities—that causes many of us concern.

I appreciate that such a huge transformation in operation will come with challenges and that the “test and learn” approach is commonplace in IT projects; but the crucial difference is that the subject of this project is someone's life. This is about people; it is about real lives. Get it right and the potential is huge, but get it wrong and the risks are simply too great. They may manifest themselves—I will say it—in debt and in hunger. So it is right that Ministers have opted to roll universal credit out slowly, steadily, carefully, because there have been unacceptable delays in claimants' first payments. The long-awaited landlord portal should have come sooner. I wish that we had had a freephone number for everyone from the beginning. There remain parts of the system that are incomplete—the minimum income floor for the self-employed and the evidence-gathering process for childcare costs need further development.

If I am honest, I believe the system will never reach its truly intended potential as the ultimate poverty-fighting machine until either the taper rate is reduced or work allowances are restored to their original pre-2015 levels.

I thank the Chancellor for reducing the taper rate by 2% in the last Budget. It cost a lot of money—£1 billion—but every penny really does matter to those living on the lowest incomes. Single parents and second parents returning to work will be worse off now than they would have been under the old system. An in-work couple will lose about £1,370 a year due to the benefits freeze and work allowance cuts. Are they not the very people we should be encouraging to get into work?

Tight fiscal discipline, razor-sharp focusing of precious resources, precise and meaningful interventions, smart thinking—that is what this Government do well. We could find the money by reversing the decision to raise the basic income tax allowance from £11,000 to £12,500 for all; but would it not be better to focus that money on those who really need it? I do not need it. I suspect Opposition Members do not need it. Not everyone needs it.

If we want universal credit to be exactly like the world of work, it has to operate like the world of work. Can any Minister or civil servant honestly say that waiting six weeks for your first payment is normal? So, from my universal credit wish list, one ask stands head and shoulders above the rest: we must get the six-week wait down.

I remain grateful to the Prime Minister for agreeing to meet me so soon after my question in the Chamber, and I appreciate the diligence and receptiveness of the Secretary of State, the Chancellor and the Minister in hearing our concerns. Members on both sides of the House, our cross-party Work and Pensions Committee, peers, charities, the Children's Commissioner and, most important of all, our constituents have raised concerns. We cannot all be wrong. The six-week wait must be reduced to a month. When we stopped the cuts to tax credits in 2015, halted further cuts to PIP in 2016 and put £1 billion back into the taper rate last year, they were the right things to do. They demonstrated the good that Government can do.

**Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): As well as making recommendations about what the Government can do, recommendations that are, I think, sincerely meant and will, I am sure, be taken on board by the Minister, does my hon. Friend agree—this has been mentioned by others in the House today—that other parties, including immoral big letting agencies, also need to act in this sphere?

**Heidi Allen:** Absolutely. System changes of this magnitude require everybody to work properly, with integrity, and not exert any kind of influence on the most vulnerable people in the country, who perhaps cannot defend themselves and are not legally trained. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right on that.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I praise the hon. Lady for the way that she has argued her point, which I entirely indorse, about the six weeks. Does she see my point that this situation is worsened when there are constituents in Caithness and Sutherland, in extremely remote parts of Scotland, who are very often out by themselves, not near a food bank, not near friends or relations who might be able to tide them over the gap? There is a rurality and sparsity issue to this, which worries me greatly.

**Heidi Allen:** Indeed, there are many elements that make it especially difficult for some people. We have to recognise that one system will not work for everybody, so we must work together to find the solutions.

The reputation of this place has hit rock-bottom again in recent weeks. Let us turn it around. I checked a couple of words in a thesaurus: “compassionate” means empathetic, thoughtful and showing concern for others,

[Heidi Allen]

while “conservative” means favouring free enterprise and traditional values. A compassionate Conservative does both those things: progressive and free, but safeguarding of society and showing care for others. Let us show we are listening. Please, Minister, let us do this.

2 pm

**Jim Fitzpatrick** (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), who has established a very positive reputation on these issues. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to debate universal credit again, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who has had a reputation for campaigning on these issues for slightly longer than the hon. Lady.

I hope that the Minister might be able to confirm, although I suspect he will not, that the media reports are true that the Chancellor will take action in next week’s Budget to reduce the waiting time for universal credit, and that other changes might be made, because it is clear from the contributions we have heard so far that the problems with universal credit are not just about waiting time.

I want to refer to statistics and individual cases from my constituency. Citizens Advice East End tells me that analysis suggests that 22,000 families in Poplar and Limehouse will be in receipt of universal credit by 2022, half of whom will be in work. It has dealt with hundreds of cases already, half of which relate to the claiming process. One involved a young mother with a five-month-old baby who was refused universal credit due to an incorrect decision on her right to reside.

On rent arrears, I am grateful for information supplied by Andrea Baker, director of housing at Poplar Harca. She tells me that of its 372 residents claiming universal credit, 98% are in arrears. That cannot be right. Something is going wrong somewhere in the system as the statistics on the benefit cap, housing benefit and the bedroom tax are less than half that figure.

Andrea says:

“Whilst there are still relatively few households transitioning to UC, the average 10 week wait for the first payment has pushed 98% of them into rent arrears. We anticipate it to be very difficult for the majority of UC households to make-up the accrued arrears. When the payment is finally received, they are likely to also owe others money, family, friends, utilities, credit cards, payday loans, loan sharks etc. And whilst we advise that paying rent should always be a priority, most know we are likely to offer time to pay in a way other creditors won’t.”

I have had similar reports from Stuart Veysey of Eastend Homes, and Mick Sweeney, former chief executive of One Housing Group.

My team, Louise Leak and Joytera Khanum, have supplied statistics from their casework. For example, a 61-year-old man, Mr M, was made redundant last year after working in a mental health facility for 22 years, following funding cuts. He was unable to find work, and with his savings depleting, he made the decision to claim universal credit in August. His claim has been continually refused on grounds of missing documentation, but in September he was informed his housing benefit would be stopped. With no universal credit or housing

benefit, Mr M has now fallen into £700 of rent arrears with his housing association. He is left with no living family and £200 to his name, and now fears eviction and homelessness, despite still—unsuccessfully—trying to claim universal credit and attending five job interviews. Mr M writes:

“After 4 decades of almost continual employment I find it utterly incredible to find myself in this parlous state and faced with possible homelessness.”

There are a number of other cases involving, for example, someone on low pay whose monthly income has been incorrectly calculated, and someone with a partner who is a full-time student whose eligibility has been incorrectly assessed because of the minimum income floor, which suggests that self-employed people are calculated as earning £1,000 a month regardless of what they are actually earning.

A lady, Ms K, attended my advice surgery in a very fragile state, both emotionally and physically. She initially made a claim for universal credit in August. She is unable to manage her affairs because of her medical and mental issues, and she missed a vital meeting, which led to her claim being closed. Her benefit was finally paid after 10 weeks, with only a small interim payment, and she had to access help from our excellent local food bank, the First Love Foundation. This case was resolved quickly, but only after the intervention of my team, who stated how concerned they were for Ms K’s wellbeing. The First Love Foundation says that universal credit referrals this year to the food bank are at 25% when they were only 4% last year.

All those cases tell me that universal credit is not working, for a variety of reasons. I hope the Minister can offer some expectation that things will improve for my constituents, as well as others whose Members of Parliament are making the case for them this afternoon.

2.5 pm

**Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) on securing this important debate. It was a pleasure to listen to my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), who made a superb maiden speech. The debate about which is the most beautiful Scottish constituency carries on to this very day.

Waiting seven weeks for a first payment, in any circumstance, is challenging. If someone, perhaps a middle-class person, got a new job and had to wait six weeks for their first pay, that would be challenging, but it is quite likely that such an individual would have savings to fall back on and there might be friends and family who could offer support. Also, that person would have a good salary to look forward to once they started the job. However, someone on universal credit or receiving benefits would be far less likely to have such savings, and friends and family might not be so able to offer that support. Such a person would be in a far trickier position if they were receiving benefits, or looking forward to receiving benefits, perhaps having lived on the minimum wage or the living wage.

We have to recognise that the six-week wait is enormously difficult for people in the most vulnerable position in society, and I believe that we ought to get closer to the vision set out when universal credit was initially rolled out—the ideas behind it such as the sense of its being

compatible with work and that work should always pay. But that is not the only aspect on which universal credit needs to get closer to that initial vision.

We need to reduce those seven waiting days. I appreciate the point about advances, but someone previously on the minimum wage and with no savings at all who has to spend seven days without any income before receiving the first payment five weeks following that seven days will find that a very difficult position to sustain with little back-up. We also need to look at the taper. I appreciate what the Government have done in the recent past, but we need to go further in improving the taper to give further encouragement for people to get into work.

However, we do have a listening Government, and I want to highlight a note sent to me by Bolton Citizens Advice:

“We welcome the Government’s recent decision to make the Universal Credit helpline free and ensure all claimants are told they can get an advance payment. We called for these changes in July because they will make a real difference to the people we help.”

**Heidi Allen:** I thought I was the ultimate UC geek and that there was nothing I did not know about it, but recently I learned that people can have a three-month payment holiday before those advance payments are paid back. Does my hon. Friend think that the jobcentres should advertise that more?

**Chris Green:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is very important to increase communication, and that awareness is vital. Citizens Advice and other organisations play a vital part.

Many people are calling for the Government to pause or perhaps even stop the roll-out of universal credit. I do not agree with that. Recently, I visited a jobcentre that serves my constituents, and people there were absolutely clear: do not stop. My hon. Friend also highlighted a number of failings with the current system, which is failing far too many people. While we need to move on to universal credit, I am equally clear that the initial wait must come down from six weeks to one month.

2.9 pm

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to have heard the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), and to follow other hon. Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) who opened the debate.

No one could object to universal credit’s ambitions to simplify the benefit systems, to smooth the passage into work, to make work pay and to reduce poverty, but so much has gone wrong in practice that it is hard to know where to start. The problems we are seeing are not just because of poor implementation; the problems have been designed in from the outset, despite repeated warnings from Opposition Members since 2011 that the programme was too ambitious, too risky, too complicated, too reliant on complex IT systems—complex for the claimant and for the Government—and did not go with the grain of people’s lives.

Let us start with the six-week wait. It is based on the assumption—I might go so far as to call it the prejudice—that the right and normal way for people to receive their income is to do so every month. That is not the case for

many low-paid workers, as we know. It is also based on the assumption, as the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) mentioned, that people have savings in the bank. Hon. Members should ask themselves whether they could manage if their income suddenly dried up for six weeks or more, especially if it was the result of an unexpected and catastrophic event—losing their job, a partner leaving, their child becoming ill, or having an accident and not being able to go to work. It is unforgivable to put extra pressure on people on the lowest incomes in those circumstances. The six-week wait must be reduced. I recognise that exceptions can be made, but it is not clear that the system is working when such exceptions should be made. My constituent B, who was fleeing domestic violence, was told that she would not have to wait for the six weeks, but she still had no money after two weeks.

That leads me on to the problems with advance payments. My constituent K was not told until her third interview with Jobcentre Plus that such payments were available, and she did secure an advance payment. However, the repayment rate is punitively high, especially when it is combined with the recovery of other debts, such as those relating to council tax or utilities, and payments imposed by magistrates courts. Under universal credit, that can mean deductions of up to 40%, leaving claimants with insufficient money to live on. As a result, one lone parent in my constituency was left with just £100.67 per week to pay all her bills, which is £110 per month less than on the legacy benefit. How can that be right?

Such problems are creating debts and rent arrears: 80% of Trafford Housing Trust customers on universal credit are in rent arrears. The collection rate for arrears of under three months is 79.3%. Although the figure is much higher for arrears of over three months, at 96.4%, that is because mistakes in paying people’s benefit have largely been sorted out by that point or because they have debt relief orders in place. That is not because they have adapted to universal credit, but because other things are kicking in.

The problems are compounded by a complete lack of understanding in Jobcentre Plus about alternative payment arrangements—in other words, paying the rent directly to landlords. Trafford Housing Trust staff have told me that Jobcentre Plus staff do not understand this, will not talk to them about it, make mistakes in the calculations and make payments to claimants that should not be made to them but which are then promptly swallowed up by the bank and other creditors. In one case, an alternative payment arrangement was refused because the debt was deemed to be one of less than eight weeks when that was not the case. This reflected the fact that Jobcentre Plus calculate the claims over a 52-week period, whereas Trafford Housing Trust work out claims over a 48-week period.

**Anna Soubry:** Broxtowe CAB has told me that it is concerned about people who are on fluctuating hours, and those fluctuations and the lack of good co-ordination with HMRC are causing real problems for people on low wages who are in receipt of UC.

**Kate Green:** I am delighted that the right hon. Lady has raised that issue because it brings me neatly to my next point, which is about the particular problems that arise with the assessment period.

[Kate Green]

My constituent S received two lots of wages in one assessment period. Similarly, we can see how those with fluctuating incomes will have different levels of payments in different assessment periods. As a result, her universal credit was calculated as zero in the month she received two payments. In the following month, she received nothing in income, but by that time her claim had been cancelled. When the benefit was introduced, we were told that HMRC's use of real-time information would sort out this kind of problem, but it did not do so. The failure was that of her employer to upload the data in time. The use of real-time information was a complete irrelevance, because the data were not in the system at all. In other cases, constituents who have been paid early—for example, because their employer provided an advance of pay before the Christmas break—have lost their award and their claim has been stopped. None of that is the fault of the claimant, but the DWP is utterly inflexible in its application of the assessment periods. What are Ministers doing about this? I am now being told that S's case could actually have been treated more flexibly, but I was not told that when I first wrote to the DWP. It is now completely unclear to me and, more to the point, to my constituents what the position is on these problems.

Finally, I want to say something about the problems when claimants migrate from ESA to universal credit. In that circumstance, if they request mandatory reconsideration and then go to a tribunal, they will find that their ESA claim is cancelled. Even if they win their tribunal claim, it cannot be reinstated, and they are forced to remain on UC. My understanding is that that was not Ministers' initial intention. Claimants are not being told, when a tribunal case starts, that they can have their ESA claim reinstated. In his summing up, will the Minister also address that point? This is putting further pressure on sick and disabled claimants who ought to be getting decent support from the benefit systems, but are not.

2.15 pm

**Kelly Tolhurst** (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak. It was a privilege to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) deliver his maiden speech. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) on securing this debate. It was very interesting to hear what he said about his constituents.

The House has debated universal credit extensively in recent weeks, and I am pleased to take part in such a debate again today. The principle of universal credit is a very good one, and the Opposition have said on many occasions that they support it, but I am concerned about the dialogue on the roll-out of universal credit in recent weeks. I believe it has caused much distress among potential claimants and people who are waiting to switch to universal credit.

For as long as I can remember, the benefit system in this country has been burdensome and complex. I have lost count of the number of people who have had issues with working and claiming benefits such as jobseeker's allowance, working tax credit and child tax credit. I have

also lost count of the number of people who have said that there must be a better way of doing things. We do indeed want a welfare system that supports the most vulnerable and is there for people when they fall on hard times and need help, including by claiming benefits that may need to be paid back.

There is an assumption that it is wrong for individuals to have to pay back advance payments—they are loans, without interest—although they are very gratefully received by claimants when they are in great need of money because of the situation in which they find themselves. I am sure that other Members have, like me, been confronted by constituents who have received large bills from the DWP following mistakes in the information given, and when overpayments have been made to people claiming working tax credit. Do Members believe that those payments should not be paid back, and would such a situation be better than this new system of universal credit?

There is also an assumption that, because of the advance payments, people will automatically get into arrears with their rent, which will result in their getting evicted. I can only speak from experience of my constituency, but I have not had any examples of people who have been evicted from their homes within six weeks. In actual fact, I have seen quite the opposite.

As we have heard, approximately 40% of the universal credit claimants are currently in work, and the number of people moving into work once on universal credit is increasing. Universal credit is part of the welfare reform that is needed, and it has been designed to help people and move more people into work. For so long, many people have been trapped in the benefit system. Such people want to work or to work for longer hours, but there is all the stress and complexity of doing so given the risk of losing all their benefits in one go or of having to pay back large sums when mistakes have been made because of the complexities in the current system. I want, and I know my constituents want, a system that helps people, but does not put them off taking opportunities when they are there. I want a system that aids people, as I believe this system will do.

With any new system there are always things that need improving once implementation begins, and I am therefore pleased that the Government have taken care to implement a gradual roll-out over nine years, moving to 10% of the current claimant count. In my opinion, the roll-out is being done in a measured and steady way that enables the Government to address the issues.

Over recent weeks I have heard a number of Members claim that universal credit is getting people into debt and causing them to be evicted, and that concerns me greatly. The rationale is that universal credit is paid in arrears to mirror the world of work, and in principle that is a good idea and forms part of how we need to reform welfare. I have been concerned by accusations that that is being done deliberately to disadvantage people who are in need of help, and perhaps at difficult times in their lives. In all debates, Ministers have been clear: people who need advance payments will get them within five days. In conclusion, I hope that after today's debate, the Opposition will work constructively with the Government to try to increase and help the roll-out of universal credit.

2.20 pm

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am pleased to take part in this debate because in my constituency, 10,700 households will be moved on to universal credit. That is 21,000 people, which is almost a quarter of my constituents. On 13 December, those with new claims and changes of circumstance will be moved across to universal credit, and over Christmas many people will face a six-week gap in their income. That is not so much a merry Christmas as a Victorian Christmas that even Scrooge did not think of.

Ministers have banged on about advance payments, but let us look at what that means in practice. Suppose that a single disabled person with a payment of £400 a month takes an advance of £200 to pay their rent. If all goes according to plan they will then have their payments abated, so that their income over the next four and a half months will be £200, £320, £320 and £360. In other words, instead of an income of £1,800 over that period, it will be £1,200. That is not a “wait”; it is a cut, and many will feel that over Christmas it is the cruellest cut.

Seven years ago in my constituency there were no food banks, but after seven years of Tory Government we now have seven food banks. Labour Members have spoken previously about the need to address free school meals, and in my opinion every child in a UC family should receive them. Now, however, to add to the loss of income, during that six-week period children will not receive free school meals either. Ministers talk about preparing people for work, but this is an in-work benefit. In my constituency, 4,500 of the households that are being moved on to universal credit—that is 40%—contain people who are already in work and have jobs.

**Vicky Ford:** My understanding is that if a child received free school meals before, they will continue to receive them. It is only for those who are new to the benefit system that there may be a delay.

**Helen Goodman:** I am sorry to inform the hon. Lady that that is not the case for new claimants and those whose circumstances have changed.

I am alarmed at what is happening to women in low-paid work. Many are trying, with great difficulty, to do their best to balance their need to earn an income with their responsibilities for collecting their children from school and looking after them properly. They might work 20 hours a week to get the right balance, but the Government are now going to employ advisers to harass them to increase their hours. When Labour was in power, we had different rules for single parents from those for other families. It seems to me that the Government are trying not to help lone parents, but to grind them down and grind down their children as well.

**Vicky Ford:** I remember under the Labour Government that single mothers came to me who were unable to continue work because they were better off on benefits. Does the hon. Lady agree that the system of universal credit is to help people move into work, rather than be better off on benefits?

**Helen Goodman:** I am sorry but the hon. Lady is wrong. I took through the statutory instruments on work conditionality myself, and when we left government, people were always £40 a week better off in work than not in work. Those are the facts.

Women fleeing domestic violence are in an even worse situation. When they arrive at the refuge, they have to register their change of address as a change of circumstance, so they will be in the vanguard of those who have a six-week gap in their income. It may even mean that some do not flee violent partners because they are worried about the effect.

In Bishop Auckland, huge preparations are being made for the roll-out of universal credit. The council and housing associations are employing more people—unlike, I am sorry to say, the jobcentres, which should be employing more people. One housing association is increasing its provisions for bad debt fourfold. Money that would have gone to building new homes is now going to deal with this Government-induced crisis in the housing system.

Three months ago I asked to attend one of the digital courses to see how people are supported by jobcentres. That is a major issue in my constituency because we have very bad broadband in the rural areas, and high levels of digital exclusion. Ministers must bear in mind that 5 million people in this country have never sent an email, and those are predominantly people on low incomes—the very people affected by this change to universal credit. We raised that point with Ministers five years ago, and it still has not been sorted out. Some single men who have already made a claim told me that people are timed out after 45 minutes if they cannot complete the claim, but it is difficult to complete in that time because there is no written guidance to tell people what documents they have to produce and scan in.

I am not saying that the problems with this system are only administrative because there are fundamental problems with universal credit, the first of which being that George Osborne took £3.5 billion out of the system. The Government refuse to recognise that people need these payments, and because of that refusal, rates are too low, payment gaps too long, and tapers too high. Let us pause and fix the system.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. I will now drop the time limit to four minutes to ensure that everybody gets in. It is the interventions that are killing it.

2.27 pm

**Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I am pleased to contribute to this debate—I have been looking at proto-plans for universal credit that go back about five years, and it is a pleasure to work with the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who is also a friend, on the Work and Pensions Committee.

Let us go back to where this all began and the reason why, in principle, we have cross-party agreement on universal credit. The previous system was not good enough. It was set up with good intentions, and it was a way of trying to take people out of poverty by giving them handouts. However, the way it was set up meant that many people were discouraged from taking on more work, which inhibited their ability to move on in life, improve their situations, and support their family. Universal credit was born out of that realisation, and from a desire to build a welfare system that would slowly remove benefits as people moved into work, and actively encourage people to take more hours and be better off.

[Alex Burghart]

We also want to create a system in which the world of life out of work mirrors the world of life in work. That means that people are in work to find work, and there is an expectation that they will look for work and sign a contract to that effect—the claimant commitment. It means that benefits will be paid on a monthly basis, so that when people move into work and monthly employment, they will be ready for that. I am afraid I cannot accept the argument that some people will never be able to cope on monthly payments. I feel that is extremely insulting to many people.

**Helen Goodman** *indicated dissent.*

**Alex Burghart:** I disagree with the hon. Lady. It is. We now have a system coming into being—

**Helen Goodman** *indicated dissent.*

**Alex Burghart:** The hon. Lady can shake her head, but it is true. It is insulting to people to say that they will never be able to cope on monthly payments. I challenge her to have that conversation with the many people who are looking for work, because they would be insulted by it. [*Interruption.*] It is unfortunate that she laughs at that because it is true. [*Interruption.*] Look, this is a very insulting way of carrying on.

**Helen Goodman:** Anybody can manage on a monthly payment of £2,000, but managing on a monthly payment of £500 is rather more difficult.

**Alex Burghart:** The hon. Lady will recognise that there are lots of people who do manage to do that. [*Interruption.*] I have had enough of this Opposition.

I am delighted to say that under the universal credit system there is personal budgeting support. No one on the Opposition Benches has referred to it, but it offers money advice to help people with a four-week payment and offers alternative payment arrangements so they can have their money paid direct to their landlord. I am very sorry to hear that the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) found that that was not working well in her jobcentre. I have spoken to people in my jobcentre and I was pleased to see that they were completely on top of how the system worked.

Within universal credit, of course, there are a lot of problems, which have been talked about today and on other days, emanating from the long wait people experience when coming into the system. At the start of the process, far too many people have been waiting for far too long. The Select Committee report has drawn on that. Since the first roll-out phase, however, a number of improvements have been made thanks to the test and learn system. The landlord portal was very favourably received by people who gave evidence to the Committee, saying it would greatly help. We have also recently seen the initial evidence interview, the once and done process, which means that more information can be brought into the system straight away. These measures are all making improvements. I say to Opposition Members that we cannot learn unless we test.

**Vicky Ford:** My hon. Friend is a great expert on this subject and I would like to hear more about the areas where he considers improvements have been made.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** If Members do not want people to speak, please say so now and I can start to take them off the list. That is what we are doing to each other. I do not mind, but when Members do not get in, please realise what is going on here.

**Alex Burghart:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

We are now left with a system in which there is a six-week wait for the initial payment. It is worth reminding the House why that exists. The very model of universal credit is about having a month-long assessment period in which the system understands how much you are earning and adjusts your payments accordingly. There must then be a calculation time which works out exactly how much people are owed. At the moment, that is a week. However, when we met Neil Couling, the DWP head of universal credit, he said that they were working to bring that down. I believe it can and should be brought down as a matter of urgency.

At the other end, of course, we still have a week's waiting time. I do not disagree with the Government very often, but my colleagues from my previous roles know that I do not believe that those waiting days should exist. There have always been some waiting days in the system—three days—but the extension to four, which was not made by this Secretary of State or under this Chancellor of the Exchequer, should not have been introduced. That is why my Committee has called on the Government to remove the seven waiting days. We should not pause the roll-out, but we should make that adjustment.

2.34 pm

**Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): I was hoping to talk the House through a timeline that covered all aspects of requiring, claiming and receiving universal credit, but the time allotted will not allow me to do so. My constituency has had full roll-out for 12 months, so this is an abridged version based on what constituents have told me at first hand.

My archetypal constituent—I will call her Mrs Smith—is 50 and married. She lives in Port Glasgow and had been working at a local retail shop, but she has left on health grounds. Seeking support, Mrs Smith goes to her local jobcentre in Port Glasgow only to find that it has been shut. She instead walks 3 miles to the jobcentre at Greenock, but is surprised to learn that no one there can advise her on what benefits she is entitled to. She is told that the staff are not benefits-trained and are not even able to offer her options. Mrs Smith subsequently learns of universal credit from a welfare rights organisation, so she applies online. This would make Mrs Smith unlike the 15% of constituents surveyed by my office, who said that they could not use a computer or had great difficulties in doing so.

Mrs Smith lodges her application today, 16 November. By 23 November, she realises that although the application has been lodged, there is in fact at least another month of waiting while the entitlement is calculated. At this point, Mrs Smith's remaining savings are used up by rent, council tax, TV licence, utility bills and shopping—the usual things. Her husband works, but he has a low income and they are now struggling financially. It is worth reminding Members at this point that the Money Advice Service found in 2016 that more than 16 million people in the UK had less than £100 in savings.

As November presses on, Mrs Smith's financial situation becomes more desperate as she has underestimated the amount of time it will take to receive support. Please remember that this story is based on real-life examples that my constituents have brought to me. People do not fall into universal credit trained; they learn as they go along. At the start of December, because of a long-standing commitment, she takes her granddaughter to the movies, using a credit card to pay. She is accumulating debt.

By mid-December, Mrs Smith applies for a crisis grant and considers visiting the local food bank. The constant pressure of having no money begins to creep into every facet of her life. She is stressed and her relationship with her husband is suffering. None the less, she makes it through to her first universal credit payment sometime after new year.

Mrs Smith's husband is paid weekly and coupled with real-time income data, which means that her universal credit payment fluctuates wildly. She is now locked in a boom-and-bust cycle, with her universal credit sometimes falling to almost nothing, while in other months she receives eight weeks of income in one assessment period.

What will the future hold for the real-life constituents of Inverclyde, apart from the uncertainty, stress and poverty that this system inflicts upon them? I am politely asking the UK Government not to ignore the overwhelming evidence. Universal credit is not working. Saying that its predecessor was worse is no excuse. It does not help my constituents from week to week. The roll-out must be halted. Take the time to reform the fundamental flaws in universal credit and then implement a system that truly offers applicants the stability on which they can build their lives.

2.38 pm

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and it was also a pleasure to listen to the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid). To be fair to his predecessor, she managed one Friday what might be a unique achievement: getting me in the same Division Lobby as the Scottish National party. We were voting in favour of her very welcome and creditable private Member's Bill, and I join my hon. Friend in wishing her all the best for her future.

I welcome the debate. It is important that we discuss universal credit again as it will have a significant impact on my constituency, as it has on others as it has been rolled out. As we have this debate, we need to be careful not to make out that the current system is fantastic. There has always been an illogicality to having a council system for some benefits—housing benefit and council tax—and then the DWP administering income-related benefits. When I was deputy leader of a large midlands council, a lot of time and resources had to be devoted to administering benefits that were, fundamentally, national benefits. There was no way to change policy or to build in any local flexibility, which raised the question of why local councils were getting involved with housing benefit. I accept that there is a slight difference with council tax, because of variations in rates between areas.

In principle universal credit is the right move, but as well as the change from weekly to monthly payments, I suggest that we also consider wider changes. BrightHouse, a store on Torquay's high street that I am happy to call a

bunch of vultures, advertises weekly costs, which means that they look nice and affordable, but the monthly and final costs are always in very tiny writing. That might be something to consider more widely. If monthly costs were advertised, the real costs of these appalling deals might be brought home to people.

I welcome the phased roll-out over nine years. As many of us remember, the tax credits system was introduced in one go, and because it is administered by HMRC, overpayments are dealt with in the same way as the underpayment of tax, but that is not appropriate for those on lower incomes. People who expect a tax bill at the end of the year will often make provision, but those who assume that they will receive a certain level of benefit under tax credits do not.

In advance of the roll-out in Torbay in May 2018, my office staff have been working with the DWP and receiving training to respond promptly to constituents' queries. We are working with other partners, too. One concern raised by John Dudley, a benefits adviser at Hele's Angels, a great organisation in one of the most deprived areas of my constituency, is around the delays to personal independence payment appeals. Given those delays, what reassurances can the Minister give us that work is being done to prevent similar problems from occurring in the very important systems for universal credit?

On the six-week initial wait, I hope that the Government are in listening mode—I am sure they are, given the press speculation this week—although I am conscious that we have the Budget next week and that the Minister might not wish to say too much. I would also be interested to hear more about whether people can have their rent paid directly to their landlord.

I shall conclude as I am short of time. This has mostly been a constructive and useful debate. It is right that we continue to hold these debates to ensure that the system works well when it is rolled out to the remaining 90% of claimants.

2.42 pm

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) for securing the debate and congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) on his maiden speech. I note that the comparative beauties of our constituencies are yet another thing to disagree on across the Chamber.

Universal credit was piloted in Inverness way back in 2013. I am always astounded by the lengths to which Members who have not experienced it will go to defend the system, given that they have not seen what is happening. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), who is no longer in the Chamber, has said elsewhere that jobcentre staff had told her that universal credit was only 60% built. We have had it since 2013, so we have been feeling its impact daily since its inception. Make no mistake: universal credit, as it rolls out to full service in its current form, without being halted and fixed, is a disaster, and it is only going to get worse as it goes to more people and the resources to support it are stretched even further.

I see Government Members shaking their heads at that. When they accused me previously of scaremongering, I invited all Conservative Members, including the Minister

[Drew Hendry]

and the Prime Minister, to come to a summit in Inverness to hear from the agencies and people involved about the problems being imposed on them, but none took up the offer. Had they done, they would have heard harrowing stories, as I tried to relate yesterday in my question to the Prime Minister, from the agencies and people there, but none of them came. Instead, when I raised my question, there was laughter—[HON. MEMBERS: “No.”] It was recorded, and people can listen to it. What was funny—the fact that it is harrowing, the fact that I was talking about cancer patients dying before their universal credit claims came through, or the fact that I was talking about terminally ill people who have to self-declare that they are terminally ill, even if they have told their doctors they do not want to know their fate? How cruel is that? And yet there was laughter.

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): There was no laughter.

**Drew Hendry:** If Conservative Members listen to the recording, they will hear the laughter loudly.

If it was not any of those things, was it the fact that we are having problems in Inverness? The manager of the local citizens advice bureau tweeted yesterday:

“Sad when the misery and suffering that is caused by UC could be found amusing by anyone—suggest they try it for a few months.”

Some adjustment is available from the Scottish Government, but universal credit is a reserved matter, so the UK Government’s constant attempts to pass the buck and abdicate responsibility for what is their responsibility is not good enough.

I have very little time, but I want to read out an email I got from somebody inside the ESA benefit inquiry line:

“the chaos that UC is causing me and my colleagues is quite simply unacceptable. People on UC realise it’s not fit for purpose so ring ESA and BEG to be let back on to the benefit but that is not possible. How long do you think it will be before one threatens suicide”?

There are so many problems with universal credit and not enough time to deal with them today. The Government need to halt it and fix it.

2.46 pm

**Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow many colleagues, including my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid).

**Michael Tomlinson:** My hon. Friend has said that it is a pleasure to follow so many speeches, but does she agree that the speech she is following got it completely wrong, in tone and manner? There are hon. Members on both sides who want to make this work.

**Rachel Maclean:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I know the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), and I can assure him that nobody on the Government Benches was laughing at his comment yesterday. Unfortunately, I could not take up his kind offer to go to Inverness—I am sure it is a wonderful place—because I was busy in

Redditch doing exactly what he said: meeting the housing providers and agencies there to make sure that the roll-out was going well.

Universal credit is designed to be an agile system. I used to work in software development, so I understand what that means in terms of designing a very complicated system that deals with individuals and their unique and different circumstances. Opposition Members have called on the Government to pause the roll-out, but that would not fix the problems they have rightly identified. The Minister has recognised the problems in the system, and we all want to work together to fix them, but the nature of an agile system is that it changes all the time in response to people using it. That is how we learn and improve the system.

We have already seen evidence of that. The Prime Minister highlighted an example yesterday when she said that the number of people in arrears on universal credit had gone down significantly—by a third, I think—in the past four months. That is evidence that the system is improving as it is being rolled out. It is a very slow-roll-out—it is taking nine years altogether—but I think that, just as we recognise the seriousness of issues that have been rightly highlighted in the Chamber in, I hope, a serious fashion, we should also recognise the real work that the Government have already done and the real progress that they have already made in addressing some of those serious issues. I hope that that work and progress will continue.

Some Members have used an extremely critical tone, and I think that that is wrong. This is a serious debate, and we are here because we care about our constituents. I am a very privileged person, and I am the first to say so. I have never had to rely on benefits, and I am sure that some Opposition Members have not had to do so either. That, however, does not preclude any of us from feeling compassion for and empathising with people who are in that position. That is why I have visited my local jobcentre and spent a long time discussing the issue with social landlords, people who work in debt counselling, and the jobcentre staff themselves.

I do not recognise the stories that I have heard about jobcentres. I heard at first hand from the jobcentre staff about how hard they were working to support the most vulnerable customers through their journeys, and they are proud to do that. Their policy is to make advance payments by default, rather than forcing people to ask for them. They are working hard on an individual basis, providing a tailored package of support for every single claimant in the constituency.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I have been on jobseeker’s allowance and I know what it is like, but the hon. Lady’s account of DWP workers is not true. A universal credit manager, quoted in the *New Statesman*, said:

“I see masses of suffering on a daily basis. Case managers... are well-trained to deal with any claimants... we know that children will suffer and go hungry for weeks.”

That is the testimony that we hear from people in jobcentres.

**Rachel Maclean:** No doubt the Minister will comment on that, but it is not the testimony that I heard at first hand from workers in my local jobcentre in Redditch.

They told me that they care about their customers and want them to get the help they need, and they are proud to provide that help.

We have heard about landlords who are sending letters to tenants who will potentially be receiving universal credit. I think that that is unacceptable behaviour on the part of private landlords, and I think it very irresponsible of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) to raise this issue constantly from his privileged position without condemning the behaviour that he should be condemning. Rent payments can now be made directly to social landlords, and work is being done to provide the same support for tenants in the private rented sector.

**Jamie Stone:** The hon. Lady has made a valid point. I shall be meeting a social landlord tomorrow, along with one of my hon. Friends. I think that Ministers, both at Holyrood level and here, should look into this matter in due course, because the current *modus operandi* does not seem right to me.

**Rachel Maclean:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention.

Let me end by saying that I think it important for us all to work together proactively across the entire system. Landlords have a stake in this. Bromford Housing Association in Redditch told me that although people are in arrears when they go into its housing, there is not a single case of an eviction. Rather than evicting vulnerable tenants, they are providing support for those people. Surely that should be our approach.

2.52 pm

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): If what I read in the media is true, the Government are planning to reduce the six-week wait to four weeks, and I hope the Minister will be able to confirm that. Although the change is welcome, however, it does not go far enough.

Gingerbread, the single parents' charity, has found that about a third of single parents were already in debt before the introduction of universal credit. When families are already struggling, there is a danger that universal credit will put many more at risk of financial hardship. Gingerbread has made several urgent recommendations, including reducing the delay in making the first payment, improving communications about advance payments, introducing longer repayment plans, and, importantly, exploring options for a move to fortnightly payments for those most in need.

While I appreciate that the intention behind universal credit is to emulate the world of work with a payment method that reflects the manner in which workers who are paid monthly are remunerated, I think we should take a step back. We should bear it in mind that many people in receipt of universal credit are in dire financial circumstances, and that trying to emulate the world of work may be just a shade too ambitious for the circumstances in which many claimants find themselves. Will the Minister consider incorporating preparation for the world of work in the support services given to claimants? That could be done in a more tailored manner that would be appropriate to each claimant's individual issues.

Other charities recommend reducing the six-week wait for the first payment to two weeks, including the Child Poverty Action Group and Citizens Advice. I have tabled several written questions on UC, and one of them concerns an issue raised with me by a CAB worker in Heywood in my constituency: if a UC claimant makes an application, they must also arrange an appointment with the jobcentre, and failure to do so invalidates the claim. The CAB worker told me that failure to make this appointment is a very common reason for applications being invalidated, leading to delays, and further compounding the cycle of debt and despair that some of my constituents find themselves in. I am pleased that the Department has replied that it will soon be implementing the option of a text message reminder and will also be reviewing its online orientation processes, to make sure all requirements are as clear as possible for all claimants.

Another issue is the question of what trigger will be put in place in the UC system to replace working tax credits, to entitle children to free school meals. The answer I received from the Department was that no decision had yet been taken and that

"our proposals on this matter will be announced in due course".

It is difficult to comprehend that such a basic issue has not been sorted out prior to roll-out, and I hope the Minister can provide some clarity on this.

The Government continually repeat their mantra of "Test, learn, rectify". Why do they feel it is appropriate to carry out tests on the most vulnerable in our society, what evidence can they show of having learned from their failures, and when are they going to start rectifying the damage that has already been done?

2.56 pm

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): I begin by congratulating my fellow Scottish Conservative, my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), on his excellent maiden speech, and also by expressing my appreciation to my hon. Friend the Minister, whose attentiveness and attention to detail are unsurpassed.

I am an avid supporter of universal credit and am fully vested in its success in my constituency, but I am not going to rehearse the arguments in favour either of welfare in general or UC specifically, as I have already spoken twice on this matter in recent weeks. Instead I shall refer briefly to certain aspects of the Select Committee report which require the reflection of Ministers.

The first matter is referred to in paragraph 3, which stresses the importance of producing "a robust statistical analysis" of the performance and impact of UC full service. I endorse that. I asked a written question last month about the average times claimants wait to receive their first payments from completion of the claim submission to UC being paid into their bank account, and I was told:

"We do not hold this information".

That was surprising to me, as I subscribe to the principle that when performance is measured, performance improves, and when performance is measured and reported back, the rate of improvement accelerates. I therefore welcome what the Select Committee observed about the ease and speed with which advances can be granted, and I confirm that this is true in Stirling, as it is in London Bridge.

[Stephen Kerr]

I am also concerned about the level of repayment, which should take into account matters such as a claimant's existing benefits and other debt repayments. Perhaps there should be a higher minimum than currently, below which repayments will not be extracted. I had a constituency case of a person who after repayments was left with only £61 for a month. Might some additional discretion be given to DWP staff on repayments, especially where overpayments have occurred due to acknowledged DWP errors?

The Select Committee report recommends that the Government should aim to reduce the standard waiting time for the first UC payment to one month, and I concur with that. I hope the Minister will reflect on it. I accept that the recommendation comes with a cost and there are budgetary considerations and this is public money which cannot be spent twice, but this is also a matter of compassion, and the experience of Stirling CAB is consistent with the Resolution Foundation research finding that more than half of low and middle-income families have no savings and two thirds have less than a month's money.

I continue to have concerns about the application process, such as online access, especially in rural areas, and the difficulties for applicants who are homeless, have alcohol and drug addiction issues, or who have no online facilities to make a claim, or have anxiety, depression or bipolar disorders. Is there a paper-based application form that could be used in extraordinary circumstances? This would help to address the needs of the small minority of people who have genuine anxiety about the digital system.

I would further ask the Minister to consider allowing DWP staff to offer claimants the option of having their rent paid directly to their landlord, as a proactive ask. Will he also consider widening the circle of approved and trusted advisers who have direct contact with DWP staff to discuss individual case needs, which can then be carefully and closely managed in liaison? In closing, I should like to express the regard I have for the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) and the work of his Select Committee, and ask the Minister to consider the conclusion of its report very carefully—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order.

3 pm

**Laura Pidcock** (North West Durham) (Lab): First, I will not take lessons from the other side about how angry we should be on this issue. We are experiencing the suffering in our communities. This debate and all the expressions of concern about this shambolic system lead me to one question: what would it actually take for the Government to pause this roll-out? All the advice services, experts in the field, local authorities, housing associations, landlord associations and private landlords are saying that the system is too riddled with problems to continue safely, yet the Government still choose to ignore their pleas. What does this say about the people in charge?

Let me be really clear about this. Universal credit is an in-work benefit as much as it is an out-of-work benefit. It is so predictable that the Conservatives would use divide and conquer tactics, creating the “strivers versus shirkers” rhetoric and the dangerous myth that this

is about those who cannot be bothered to work versus those who can. Universal credit is as much about those in work as those who are not. If this Government last—at the moment, that appears to be a big “if”—7.2 million people will be on universal credit by 2022. Half those people will be in work and subsidising their low pay. I repeat that this is about those who are in work. The system is a scandal.

There are simply too many issues to raise now, but I want to highlight some of the most important. The first is the wait. People should not have to wait six weeks for a payment. The system embeds financial crisis from day one. If a reduction in waiting time by one or even two weeks is announced in the Budget, we should not be surprised if there are no cheers or celebrations from the organisations that are supporting people, because they know that it will only be a tactic on the part of the Government to release political pressure on themselves.

Let me move on to the other problems. Advance payments are not a solution. They are not automatically granted; they are calculated as 50% of the claimant's entitlement; and they have to be repaid in six months. They exacerbate debt.

**Rachel Maclean:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Laura Pidcock:** Absolutely not. We have heard enough from that side.

Removing the severe disability premium and the enhanced disability premium is callous and part of a wider agenda of reducing the welfare budget. It will lead to disabled people—I repeat, disabled people—being worse off. Also, direct payments to claimants are creating rent arrears. As of yesterday, according to Karbon Homes in my constituency, 75% of people already on universal credit are in rent arrears averaging £810. Yes, that is because of the wait period, but it is also because of the financial demands on my constituents. How can the Government square the fact that rent has to be paid in advance, while universal credit is paid in arrears? Not to mention the DS1500 forms and the fact that those who are terminally ill have to go to the jobcentre themselves because the form cannot be submitted by someone else without explicit consent.

I am deeply concerned that the Government are rolling this system out in my constituency on 13 December. The first payments are expected on 28 January. Who set this roll-out date? Why on earth did this get signed off? These points are just the headlines; I could go on and on about the serious flaws of universal credit. The Government have had all the warning they need; they are now choosing to inflict this Frankenstein's monster of a system with little or no regard for the wellbeing of people up and down the country. I do not know how the people rolling this out can sleep at night.

3.4 pm

**Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab): I welcome the constructive comments from Members on both sides of the House. I have set up an all-party group to work with all Members, and I would welcome to the group any Member who has concerns, so that we can look seriously at all the problems that have beset universal credit. The six-week wait is just the start. It is just the start of a horrendous time for anyone who is claiming universal credit.

The local housing allowance for a family three-bedroom house in my constituency is £150 a week. There is a seven-day wait with no payment whatsoever, so a household can be £150 down to start with. The allowance is paid in arrears, but rent is paid in advance, as my hon. Friends have said, so a claimant can be £750 in arrears before they even start receiving universal credit. That is where all the reports of arrears are coming from and it is absolutely wrong. This is not about people on low pay not being able to manage; the system just does not take account of the realities of their lives.

I mentioned the six-week wait to the Minister on Monday and pointed out that it was six weeks until Christmas Day. Those who are applying for universal credit this week will have to wait until after Christmas to receive their payment. They will have just two weeks' pay to get by on over those six weeks, and services will not be open over Christmas. I appreciate that the Government want to wait for the Budget before taking action, but they must appreciate that the people who are waiting for money over Christmas—families who will be able to afford no sort of Christmas—need the Government to act now to ensure that they can receive the payments they need to feed their children and give them a decent Christmas.

When I asked the Minister about that on Monday, he suggested that people could work more hours in the run-up to Christmas. Indeed, many employers are seeking additional people and overtime. Having worked for USDAW—the shop workers' union—for many years, I can testify that many people rely on overtime in the run-up to Christmas. Under tax credits, that is perfectly reasonable, and people receive their pay at the end of the day because there is an income disregard, whereby if someone's income increases by £50 a week on average, they do not lose any tax credits. There is nothing of that sort under universal credit. For every extra pound that someone earns in overtime, they will lose at least 63p from their next universal credit payment. People who do overtime in good faith, and as advised by the Minister, will find that their next month's universal credit payment has fallen by 63% or even 75% of the overtime that they have earned. That does not help them to cover the costs of Christmas or to stay out of debt.

Like hon. Members on both sides of the House, I am suggesting that the taper rate should be reduced and that an earnings disregard, like that under tax credits, should be introduced. The Government need to pay attention to the realities of people's lives under a monthly benefit system that hits them hard as soon as they earn any extra. There is an earnings disincentive that the Government must consider. They need to ensure that passported benefits come to everyone—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order.

3.8 pm

**Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) for securing this debate and acknowledge that this is the start of the Work and Pensions Committee's work on this matter. The six-week delay has become totemic, but it is far from the only problem with universal credit which, let me be clear, has been a disaster. Anyone who looks at its original plan, budget and timetable cannot conclude anything else. The roll-out should have finished this year. Instead, it has reached only 10% of people,

but it has done 10,000 times the damage to those who are now affected by it. Universal credit has cost more, and it has delivered less. It was always intended to cut help for 450,000 disabled people through axing the severe disability premium, ending the disability income guarantee and making DLA or PIP less generous for disabled people in work and for disabled children. That was the intention, and it has been made still less generous through the tax allowance changes.

The pretence that the roll-out has gone smoothly needs debunking. Instead of listening and acting on concerns, the Government have doubled down. They told us that things were tickety-boo and hunky-dory just a few weeks ago. They told us that they did not need to pause, tweak or fix it. Then, however, they did not vote on our Opposition day motion on universal credit because they know that universal credit is failing. They have yet to outline how that structural incompatibility will be changed in the longer term.

My home is in Southwark, which has been affected by universal credit and is in the test area. I refer people every week to my food bank, which has seen a third more people this year and has seen a tripling in the number of children needing help solely due to universal credit being extended to parents. Southwark Council has £6 million-worth of arrears from universal credit recipients. Ministers like to pretend that people are carrying arrears and debt over from other systems, which is simply untrue—it is a myth. The average housing benefit tenant in Southwark is £8 in credit, and the average Southwark tenant on universal credit is now £1,800 in arrears, which is unacceptable.

Cutting the timeframe might help, but many other problems need to be fixed including tackling problems with payment amounts. We have heard about real-time information problems today, but payment amounts will affect many more in self-employment and on zero-hours contracts. The Government also need to make clear what payment options, including fortnightly payments, are available, and they need to make alternative payment arrangements the standard for some groups. They need to enhance the trusted partners scheme to allow councils greater management control. They need to maintain housing payments for people moving on to universal credit from housing benefit, and they need to remove the seven-day waiting period before assessment, which is an utter con.

Ministers have had the chance to fix those issues, and they declined the opportunity to do so a few weeks ago, so anyone trying to claim universal credit today will see Boxing day before they get a single penny of support. Father Christmas will arrive before any support and, because of the delays, the Easter bunny is likely to arrive before some people get a penny of help from this Government. For the record, I do not believe in the Easter bunny, but I am still optimistic about Father Christmas appearing today in the form of the Minister offering an early Christmas present by announcing that he will tackle payment delays and resolve all the other problems with universal credit.

3.11 pm

**Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) on highlighting some of the deeply rooted problems with the accelerated roll-out of universal credit.

[Angela Crawley]

However, it is indicative of this Government's complete disregard that we find ourselves debating the issue again.

I highlight the notable contributions of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead, my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), and the hon. Members for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) and for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) and their passionate calls to pause the roll-out and to fix the system, which is absolutely necessary.

I thank the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) for his kind words for our colleague and friend, and I assure him that of course my constituency is the most beautiful part of the country.

Elements of universal credit have been live in my constituency for some time, but we moved to full service early last month. In past debates, the Government have said that universal credit will work for those who require support, but if that is the case, why has my local authority, South Lanarkshire Council, had to move almost £1.5 million from its revenue account into its welfare mitigation fund? The reason is to keep a roof over the heads of people who are falling into rent arrears as a result of universal credit.

It is worth noting that it was the right-to-buy policy of this Government and of the previous Tory Government, coupled with a failure to replace housing stock, that has decimated social housing provision across the UK. That money would be better spent on building council houses, on supporting people in their tenancies and on improving the existing housing stock.

I have repeatedly called on the Government to halt the roll-out and fix the systemic problems with universal credit. Does the Minister have a hearing problem? Forgive me, but if he is not hearing correctly, let me say it again: it is necessary for the Government to halt the roll-out until the problems have been ironed out. Members on both sides of the House have told him there are problems. Some Conservative Members have not yet experienced the problems and are therefore probably not able to speak with a great degree of authority. Let me assure them that the problems are stark and huge, and they will fall on the doorstep of their constituency offices, as they have on ours.

I have repeatedly called on the Government to halt and fix the roll-out, yet today I find myself asking once more for the same thing. At best, the Government might row back, reduce the waiting time and slightly improve the circumstances, but the fact is that this is a flawed policy. If they admit it and concede that there are problems, why not halt the roll-out and fix it properly and completely? I have even invited the Prime Minister to visit my constituency on a number of occasions to see the damage at first hand, but the invitation has been ignored.

Despite this fact, the roll-out has gone ahead and the number of people in crisis due to complex problems has gone up and up. A constituent of mine has had to wait more than 12 weeks for payments; some have received payments without the housing costs to which they are entitled; and some have been forced to register as homeless.

In the last debate, I heard a Conservative Member state that universal credit will end the days of private landlords discriminating against social security claimants. He said, "Gone are the days of the signs outside the estate agents reading 'No DSS Need Apply.'"

Let me tell that Member and all Conservative Members that that could not be further from the truth. Private landlords, unsure whether they will be guaranteed their rental income, are evicting people across South Lanarkshire simply because they are in receipt of UC. The already sizeable housing list in my area is being added to by this poorly executed policy. These failures are unacceptable for a social security system that is meant to stop people falling through the cracks in society—that is exactly what it is ensuring it is doing. The failure to address these problems is only pushing further people into homelessness and poverty.

For the sake of perspective, it is worth looking back at the initial design of universal credit and comparing it with where we stand now. When it was introduced in 2013, it promised to lift 350,000 children and 600,000 adults out of poverty. How is that working out for us, eh? It was promised that it would increase entitlements and improve rewards earned from work. It was to allow smooth transitions in and out of work, as claimants would not have to claim a different set of benefits when starting or ending a job. Please remind me: how is that working out for us?

Problems apparent now went unmentioned back in 2013. Design flaws such as the six-week waiting time for a first payment were then unknown—they are known now, so what are the Government going to do about them? There seems now to be an expectation that people claiming benefits are able to survive for a month and a half with nothing to live on. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), who was the one originally involved in the inception and creation of this policy, proudly told journalists at the time that he could live on £53 per week. I wonder whether he could live on fresh air for six weeks.

For many of my constituents, universal credit has meant falling into debt traps, through taking out loans or advances through the DWP only later to have the cash removed from their already meagre payments. This is the reality of the roll-out of universal credit. What are this Government going to do about it? Even though we have pointed out the myriad problems with the system, I am still waiting, in the fourth debate, to hear anything come back from this Government. If the Government today, as I suspect they will, make a small advancement, that in itself would be an admission that the system is not working and it is time to halt the roll-out. Even back then, and on many occasions since, we have stood here and told the Government the problems. Government Back Benchers, failing in their mission to scrutinise the Government, have failed to accept that there are problems with this roll-out and instead have ignored them.

Each and every time my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) has met Citizens Advice, he has been informed that it is not allowed to perform the role of advocacy because it is not mandated to make representations on behalf of clients. This is a clear attempt to undermine the support available to people that makes sure they get the help they need. Worse than that, one of my constituents has had to wait 12 weeks before his universal credit payment came through, even though

his change in circumstances was outwith his control. The DWP had not uploaded documents he had sent it initially with his claim, and when these documents were finally attached to his file some weeks later, as this was discovered, a further six weeks was added to his waiting time. That is the reality of universal credit. What will the Minister do to resolve the issue?

I am asking the Minister this: does he accept—*[Interruption.]* Of course he will have his time to answer—he has plenty of time. The fact is that universal credit is not fit for purpose and people are suffering. I urge him to halt the roll-out and fix the problems.

3.19 pm

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) on his maiden speech. He showed his obvious commitment to his constituency and it was kind of him to praise his predecessor. I, too, extend my good wishes to her.

There have been some outstanding contributions to what has been a fiery debate. I congratulate the Chairman of the Work and Pensions Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), on securing the debate and on the Select Committee's timely report on the six-week wait for universal credit. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) on her excellent speech, as well as my hon. Friends the Members for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), for High Peak (Ruth George) and for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), along with the hon. Members for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley). The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) took a sensitive and analytical approach to the report, and described what needs to happen in a measured way. She is not currently in her place, but the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) of course gave a characteristically bold speech.

This is the third debate on universal credit in the past month. Today, as in the previous two debates, the Government have been called on to reduce the six-week waiting period that applicants face. As we have heard, what some have called the "long hello" is believed to be one of the primary drivers of the rise in debt and arrears that we are now seeing. Some 49% of families who are in arrears under universal credit state that their arrears started after they made their claim and because of the waiting times to receive payments, support being delayed or stopped, or administrative errors.

On Monday the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), told the House that as universal credit is being rolled out, social housing providers across the north of England are finding more and more of their tenants are going into rent arrears. The total debt of 10,500 universal credit claimants is nearly £4.2 million, with an average of just over £400 each. In Greater Manchester, where universal credit was first piloted, the average arrears for UC tenants is now £824 compared, with £451 for non-UC tenants. In London, it is even worse: councils such as Southwark are estimating average arrears of approximately £1,700 per UC tenant.

What about the private rented sector? We have heard some of the serious issues related to pre-emptive strikes in respect of tenancy agreements. A landlord contacted me because he was concerned about three of his tenants who are thousands of pounds in rent arrears. They had never previously been in arrears.

A reduction in the six-week wait would be a good start, so I look forward to hearing the Minister's response on that. I was disappointed—as, I think, was Mr Speaker—to hear of certain revelations coming out in the media yesterday. I hope that the Minister will enlighten us as to whether the wait is going to be reduced by one or two weeks. Reducing the six-week wait would only be a start, because it will not address the significant design issues that we have seen since the start of universal credit.

Some examples of those design issues are: the monthly payment being made in arrears following a monthly assessment period, when most people in receipt of UC are paid weekly or fortnightly; the payment being made to the main earner of the household, predominantly the man; rent being paid to the claimant rather than to the landlord; self-employed people being subject to the punitive minimum income floor, which fails to reflect the reality of the peaks and troughs in their working hours; the real-time information flaws that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) has mentioned previously, and for which there is no time limit to disputes, leading to more delays in payments; and, of course, the in-work conditionality coming down the track, which will mean a million working people visiting jobcentres while much of the Jobcentre Plus estate is being closed, and facing financial sanctions if they fail to work the hours their job coach deems they must.

In addition, reducing the waiting time does not tackle the chronic issues with implementation and functionality. A pregnant woman got in touch with me when a change in circumstances meant that she had to apply for universal credit because her ESA claim was closed. She could not apply online, and was given a number to call, then another one, then another one and finally, she was referred back to the original number. To say that training is needed is an understatement.

My hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spennings Dale (Tracy Brabin) mentioned yesterday at Prime Minister's questions the ridiculous position of one her constituents who did not have photo ID and had to have their identification verified by their doctor rather than being able to use their verified identification on the legacy benefits that they had previously been receiving. There are also issues with lost claims and so on.

The recent Social Security Advisory Committee report on in-work progression highlights those issues in its section on "Getting Delivery Right". There is no getting away from the fact that the system is complex and more than struggling to cope, and that is not helped by the simultaneous closure of one Jobcentre Plus in 10. It must be recognised that the objective of simplicity should be for ease of access and navigation of the system by claimants. That is still not happening and must be addressed. I am pleased that the Government acceded to the need for Freephone numbers, but I would like to hear when they will be up and running—it is now three weeks since they were announced. We know that much more help is still needed.

[Debbie Abrahams]

Let me turn now to the cuts that were wielded to universal credit in the 2015 summer Budget. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies said at the time, they mean that the promise that work would always pay—a primary objective of universal credit—has been lost. Let us remind ourselves of those cuts. They include: cuts to work allowances which, for example, mean that a couple with two children claiming housing costs will receive £192 a month, down from £222 a month; cuts to nearly a million families with more than two children; and cuts to disabled people on ESA work-related activity group of £1,500 a year when they transfer on to universal credit's limited capacity to work. There is also the freeze in the uprating of universal credit to take account of inflation.

Those cuts will see 3 million families worse off by as much as £2,600 a year. For some it is even worse. For example, in real terms, a single parent, who is working as a full-time teacher, with two children will be £3,700 a year worse off. The cumulative effect of these cuts to universal credit will see more working-age people and their children pushed into poverty. The Child Poverty Action Group has estimated that, by 2022, an additional million children will have been pushed into poverty, 300,000 of whom will be under five. They will be accompanied by 900,000 adults.

Although reducing the waiting period is a start, it will not be sufficient to prevent rising debt, arrears, and worse. That is why Labour has called for universal credit to be paused while it is fixed. As I have said before, in addition to reducing the six-week wait, we want all claimants to be able to decide whether they want fortnightly or monthly payments, whether they want payments split in the household and whether they want the housing payment to be paid directly to the landlord. Fundamentally, we want investment in universal credit to ensure that work does always pay and that our children and young people are not being pushed into poverty, left destitute or worse.

With nearly a million people set to move on to universal credit over the winter, the Budget gives the Government an opportunity to deliver on their promise “to make the country work for everyone”.

I hope that they take it.

3.28 pm

**The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds):** I congratulate the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) on securing this important debate today and also thank Members from across the House for such a good and constructive debate. Unfortunately, my time is now extremely short, but I will try to respond to as many points as I can.

In particular, I wish to mention the absolutely outstanding maiden speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid). He paid generous tribute to his predecessor and spoke about how he was focused on securing the best Brexit for businesses in his constituency, particularly those around fishing and farming. He talked about some of the other opportunities for the future around oil and gas and tourism. Overall, he painted a colourful picture of his constituency and what a wonderful place it would be in which to live. Clearly, he will be a great asset to this House and to our

democracy. The accents from his part of Scotland are always rich and characterful, but they sound so much better when they come from this side of the House.

Universal credit has been the subject of a number of debates over recent weeks, but it remains important not to lose sight of why this vital reform is needed, and the key principles behind it, which my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) outlined effectively. Today on the main out-of-work benefits, someone who does more than a minimal amount of work would have to go through the upheaval of changing to a different benefits system. That can deter some people on jobseeker's allowance from taking on seasonal work, for example, or a trial position. The obstacles to starting work can act even more strongly for people with disabilities who are on ESA. On ESA, people can only do so-called “permitted work” of up to £120 a week. There is no “permitted work” under universal credit, because work is permitted full stop. People do not have to make a choice between starting a career and getting support through the benefits system.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) said, universal credit simplifies the system, merging six benefits into one, and asking people to deal only with one part of Government, not three. It is paid monthly in arrears, like most jobs these days, allowing claimants to structure their expenditure around a monthly fixed payment day. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) asked me to outline how many people in work are paid fortnightly these days. The answer is about 3%. The majority of people are paid monthly, a sizeable minority are paid four-weekly and, of course, quite a lot of people are still paid weekly. Overall, about 70% of people in work are paid either monthly or four-weekly.

The month-long assessment period starts straightaway for people transferring from another benefit, and for members of certain vulnerable groups. For newly unemployed people, eligibility—and, therefore, the assessment period—starts seven days later. These waiting days reflect the principle that benefit support is not intended to cover very short periods of unemployment. Of course, they also exist in jobseeker's allowance. The monthly in-arrears payment cycle is fundamental to the design of universal credit, meaning that an individual's benefit payment each month can reflect what they earned in that month, and can take account of all the different patterns in which different people are paid.

Beyond the month-long assessment period, there is a further time of up to a week for final calculation, verification and making the payments. All DWP benefit payments, including universal credit, are made using the BACS system, which takes three working days to process. A claimant's first universal credit payment due date will be seven calendar days after the end of their initial assessment period, and subsequent pay days will be on the same date each month thereafter. If the UC pay day falls on a weekend or bank holiday, it will be brought forward to the nearest working day. That is what the seven days after the monthly assessment period are for: three days for calculation, data verification and BACS processing; and four days to allow for the fact that the payment due date may come on a Saturday, Sunday or bank holiday, to then allow us to pay claimants ahead of that due date.

If someone is leaving a job, they normally have a final pay packet, and some may also have redundancy pay. If people are moving on to universal credit from another benefit such as ESA, JSA or income support, paid fortnightly in arrears, they will have their final payment from that benefit. We do realise that different people's circumstances vary, so advances are therefore available.

My hon. Friends the Members for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) and for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) reminded us that no one need go five or six weeks without money. People can get an advance payment of up to half of their indicative award, recouped over six months or, as we were reminded, in some cases longer. Advances are available and paid within five working days. In an emergency, they can be paid on that same day. These advances are not like a loan in the sense that no interest is payable, and they are not like a wage advance in the sense that they do not just get taken fully out of the first wage packet.

I must stress—it is worth repeating—that the universal credit payment cycle is then monthly, with the payment made on the same date each month, unless that date falls on a Saturday, a Sunday or a bank holiday, in which case the payment would be advanced to the nearest working day.

This monthly assessment is a much better system than the tax credits system, which works on estimates and often involves big adjustments at the end of the year, including requiring people to pay back sometimes large sums, which they might, of course, already have spent, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) rightly reminded us.

So UC erases the binary distinction between in work and out, and removes the need to flip in that way from one benefit to another and then back again. Three separate peer-reviewed studies show that people are more likely to be in work after six months if they are on UC than if they are on JSA. Those are matched samples comparing people who are similar in other respects, apart from the benefits they were on.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) asked about the direct payment of rent. Since the then Labour Government's reform of 2008, the default position has been that people in the private rented sector handle their own rent. Universal credit extends that principle to people renting from a council or housing association, but we can pay rents direct to landlords, and a sizeable minority of social sector tenants on universal credit have that arrangement right now. We are further improving the set-up process to make rent payment direct, where appropriate, for the social sector—through the trusted partner status—and for private rentals.

We are also able—the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) asked about this—to make payments more frequently than monthly. That can be fortnightly or, indeed, weekly, when that is necessary, and we can split payments between members of a couple.

Universal credit is a vital reform that changes how we support people out of work and in work and how we help them progress from one to the other. It is a lot of change—a new benefit, a new IT system, a new operational system and new ways of working with partners—and, yes, that does bring with it some challenges. We will continue to work with claimants, stakeholders, partners, and hon. and right hon. Members on both sides of the

House to resolve those challenges as they arise and to improve universal credit as it is introduced across the country. However, it is important that we continue with universal credit in order to realise the benefits that it brings, including boosting employment by an estimated quarter of a million when fully rolled out.

Universal credit is being introduced at a measured pace over nine years. Between last month and January, it will go from covering 8% of the benefits-claiming population to 10%. This gradual, careful approach, with planned pauses in the roll-out to learn and to respond to issues as they arise, means we can continually adjust and evolve the programme.

Universal credit is the biggest modernisation of the welfare state in a generation. Already, it is transforming lives, and we are determined to see this reform through.

3.37 pm

**Frank Field:** Everybody who has spoken on both sides of the House has called on the Government to move and to change their approach. Instead of inviting us to attend to our jobcentres, I will be writing to the Secretary of State and the Minister of State to invite them to come with me and my colleagues to the six worst blackspots in terms of how universal credit is affecting people's lives, and to do so before the Budget.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House notes the First Report of the Work and Pensions Committee, Session 2017-19, Universal Credit: the six week wait, HC 336; and calls on the Government to reduce the standard initial wait for a first Universal Credit payment to one month.

**Frank Field:** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wish to seek your advice. How might I ask the Secretary of State to come before the House on Monday to respond to the unanimous recommendation we have made to the Government to begin the reform of universal credit, so that some of our constituents might have slightly better Christmases than they would otherwise?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point. I understand why he wishes the Secretary of State to come to the House, but the Minister has just been before the House, addressing those very points. I am quite sure that the Secretary of State will note what has been said in the House this afternoon and that he will note the request from the right hon. Gentleman.

**Frank Field:** Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Minister of State, bless him—*[Laughter.]* No, seriously, because he is an incredibly good guy. He made his speech before we had made a collective decision. We are in a new position now. The whole House has unanimously asked the Government to move, and that is what I want the Secretary of State to address on Monday.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for making his point. He knows, of course, that it is not a matter for me, but the Minister is, as the right hon. Gentleman pointed out, sitting at the Dispatch Box and I am quite sure that he and the Secretary of State will pay attention to the points that the right hon. Gentleman and all hon. Members have made this afternoon.

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

We now come to the Back-Bench debate on defence aerospace industrial strategy. Come on: everybody leaving, leave quickly. It is not fair. There is little time left.

## Defence Aerospace Industrial Strategy

[Relevant document: Oral evidence taken before the Defence Committee on 25 October, on Work of the Department 2017, HC 439.]

3.40 pm

**Ruth Smeeth** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered defence aerospace industrial strategy.

I must begin by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this very important debate on the Floor of the House. I also thank my friend, the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts), for co-sponsoring it.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am sure you would agree that the calibre of Members here on a Thursday afternoon is testimony to the importance that the House places on both our military and the need for them to have the right kit, at the right price, at the right time. Our debate on this matter is timely. This month we mark the 100th anniversary of the creation of our Royal Air Force. It therefore seems fitting that we should also recognise the fundamental role that our domestic defence aerospace sector has played in maintaining our country's aerial supremacy for generations.

Last weekend all of us here today, along with millions of British citizens, gathered across the country to commemorate the courage and the sacrifice of those men and women who have served in our armed forces, to protect our country. But while we remember those who have fallen defending our country, we must also honour those currently in uniform. Their dedication, skill and bravery is demonstrated every day, in every corner of the world.

These efforts are exemplified by those 1,350 service personnel who are currently supporting Operation Shader. In the last week alone, RAF Tornados and Typhoons undertook further operations in support of the battle against Daesh, eliminating hidden improvised explosive devices, destroying Daesh stockpiles and, vitally, disposing of Daesh armoured truck bombs. Over the course of this conflict against the most barbaric and ideological of opponents, British air support has played a vital role, striking Daesh 1,384 times in Iraq and 262 times in Syria.

The men and women of our RAF, and indeed of our entire armed forces, serve with courage and distinction, but they do not operate in isolation. They require the platforms and the weapons to do their job effectively and with as little collateral damage as possible. Their military success depends on the technology and the weaponry that we can bring to bear and—crucially for this debate—on the wider defence family that develops, designs, manufactures and maintains it. I am delighted that members of the defence aerospace industry from the GMB at Brough are in the Gallery today.

The men and women who develop these products do so in the knowledge that it may well be the sons and daughters of their friends and neighbours who are called upon to use them. They understand the stakes and they do everything they can to ensure that when our armed forces are deployed, our brave service personnel have what they need to keep them safe and to get the job

done, in order to keep us safe. They recognise their role in defending our country; the question today is, do we, and importantly, do the Government?

I maintain that it is the defence family—the inventors and engineers, tradesmen and technicians, fitters and fabricators—who have built Britain's defence industry into a world leader and sustained our sovereign capability in a world where such strength has never been more vital. It is that very defence family which I fear is currently being sold short by the Government, especially in the aerospace sector. Unless we address that now, the situation will become even more challenging in a post-Brexit world. Simply put, to ensure our sovereign capabilities post-Brexit, we need to develop a defence aerospace industrial strategy now to protect our domestic skill mix.

The Government have recognised that need in our maritime defence sector with the development of the national shipbuilding strategy. All we are asking today is that the same generosity be applied to the defence aerospace sector to give it and the workforce some stability for the next generation.

That is not beyond us. British industry has developed such iconic aircraft as the Hawk, the Harrier, the Tornado and the Typhoon, and that is before we even touch on the A400M or any of our helicopters. We have earned our place as a global leader in the manufacture and support of combat aircraft. It is, however, my contention that the development of a long-term industrial strategy for our defence aerospace industry would do far more than reassure an individual sector. It would provide lasting benefits to our economy, retain a valuable skills base, guarantee our sovereign military capability and secure our position on the global stage.

**Mr Mark Francois** (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The hon. Lady has mentioned Tornado twice, including the valuable role it has played in Op Shader. It remains a potent combat aircraft, even today. Does she agree that when the Tornado retires from service in 2019 we should keep some as a war reserve, and that British industry has the skills and capability to support that?

**Ruth Smeeth**: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman, who has raised that point repeatedly in recent months. We have to decide what reserves we need, but that is no replacement for the development of our future capabilities.

First, on our economy, our defence aerospace sector makes an enormous contribution. It is the core of our wider defence industry, which directly employs more than 142,000 people, with a further 116,000 indirectly employed in the supply chain. In 2016, BAE Systems alone contributed £11.1 billion of gross value added to the UK—equivalent to 0.6% of our entire economic output—but there is further additional value to ensuring that those defence jobs stay in the UK. The Royal United Services Institute has calculated that for every pound the Government spend on a defence contract when the good or service is generated in the UK, the Treasury receives 37p back in revenue, as well as the new platform or system we have procured.

It is self-evident that a strong defence industry is a major contributor to a strong national economy, and our defence aerospace industry supports thousands of well-paid and highly skilled jobs, the majority of which are outside the south-east, as well as boosting our economy

through exports of world-class products. Our defence aerospace sector accounts for 88% of all defence exports—an incredibly important aspect of our economy, especially as we look to leave the EU, not least for the impact on our future balance of payments.

But there are challenges in the sector that fundamentally relate to two factors. One is that export sales typically depend on the use of future platforms by our own RAF—the British brand and RAF stamp of approval mean a huge amount for other state actors. When buying British is key for the global success of the sector, we need to pay attention.

The second significant challenge is the extended lead-in times and development processes that characterise the defence aerospace industry. That requires a long-term strategy, not a short-term fix, to ensure a steady drumbeat of orders and constant research and development to maintain confidence within the industry and to protect jobs and our domestic skills base.

We have seen recently what happens when that certainty is missing from the market, with BAE announcing up to 2,000 redundancies owing to a gap in its order book. Those job losses are not just a blow for those workers and their families, but could result in a loss of skill and expertise that could set us back a generation. I believe that those jobs could be protected in the short term if the Government committed to bringing forward the order for the new Hawk aircraft for the Red Arrows and to securing the next wave of export contracts for that aircraft.

**Andrew Percy** (Brigg and Goole) (Con): The Hawk aircraft is incredibly important to my constituents, many of whom work at BAE Systems in Brough. As well the work the Government are rightly doing to support the Hawk overseas, bringing forward the Red Arrows replacement aircraft would fill part of the gap in the order book, as the hon. Lady has outlined. Could that not also be done in such a way as to support the development of new orders so that what is built now does not necessarily have to be part of the replacement fleet, but can be used as a stopgap?

**Ruth Smeeth**: I completely agree. Let us be clear: this is a brand-new aircraft, and our Red Arrows, with their skills set, should be selling it to the world.

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): At the moment, this clearly hinges on the Qatari order, but does my hon. Friend agree that if that does not come forward and the Government do not bring forward the Red Arrows replacements, we may not have any sovereign capability for building fast jet trainers in this country?

**Ruth Smeeth**: I completely agree. The reality is that this is about our sovereign skills mix, and about whether we can develop future training aircraft or fast jet aircraft. This is also about people's lives: for the people in the Gallery, this is about the jobs they will move on to in the future. This is therefore a key moment at which the Government should act.

**Mr Jones**: Does my hon. Friend agree that if we lose that sovereign capability, either the Red Arrows will go altogether, or the Red Arrows will in the future be flying Italian, French or possibly South Korean aircraft?

**Ruth Smeeth:** Perish the thought that the Red Arrows should fly anything other than British-built planes. Let us be clear: 2030 was not a date anyone recognised until recent weeks for the renewal of the Hawks. I say this as a young Member of this House, obviously—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]—but the newest Hawk aircraft used by the Red Arrows is six months older than me, so this is not showing off the best and brightest of our potential capability.

**Andrew Percy:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Ruth Smeeth:** I will, so long as the hon. Gentleman says how young I am.

**Andrew Percy:** We are both very young Members. [Interruption.] Well, it appears there is not so much agreement about that in my case.

On the age of the aircraft, have there not been some really troubling reports about just how few of our current Red Arrows aircraft are actually able to fly at any one time? That is why the 2030 date seems somewhat strange to many of the people who are intimately involved in the group.

**Ruth Smeeth:** I had the privilege of sitting in Red 1 last year, so I absolutely agree. The Red Arrows are our showcase for the RAF, and for us not to be investing at the time of the 100th anniversary of the RAF seems to me somewhat short-sighted.

I am not in favour of having a new aircraft just for the sake of it, but this is our most impressive and important defence engagement tool, and one of the priorities of the RAF. The Red Arrows can show off the best of our new technologies on a global stage, and we should encourage them to do so. However, I acknowledge that this would be a sticking plaster, and the long-term security of these and other sites can be guaranteed only by the development of a clear, genuine industrial strategy for the future of UK defence aerospace.

**Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con):** I recall that when I was a young major—I am still young, as I am sure the hon. Lady would agree—we were talking in 1984 about the requirement for a defence aerospace industrial strategy. We sometimes change the name, but we keep talking about the same thing. The truth of the matter, however, is that every time there is a defence review, the defence aerospace industrial strategy goes into the bin. I am afraid that that is the reality of the situation. We all want such a strategy, but it keeps getting scrapped, like so many of our aircraft.

**Ruth Smeeth:** This is the perfect chance for the Government to ensure that there is a real opportunity to have an industrial strategy. They must put their money where their mouth is and move forward with such a strategy.

My second point relates to the retention and development of our domestic skills base. Our defence aerospace industry operates at the absolute cutting edge of modern technology. This is a highly skilled, highly qualified workforce, and their talents are a national resource that need to be nurtured as well as retained. Such expertise enabled us to play a major role in developing the F-35 alongside our US partners—a project that was secured by our unique knowledge through the design of the Harrier jump jet.

When deals stall and future projects are uncertain, those jobs are put at risk, and if they go, those skills go with them. Once the capability to develop and produce complex systems in any field has been lost, it can be incredibly difficult and time-consuming to rebuild. One has only to look at the experience of the Astute programme to see the danger. Delays in our procurement of a new submarine programme led to significant redundancies of very specific skills which meant that, embarrassingly, when we eventually decided to upgrade our submarine capability, we had to go cap in hand to an American firm to help us rediscover and upskill the skills that we had lost after the completion of the Trident programme in Barrow.

**John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op):** My hon. Friend is right to mention the problem in Barrow, and I am sure she will agree that not only was reskilling a problem, but there was a massive extra cost to the taxpayer in a programme that had only one supplier. In aerospace we could lose out to competitors. Other people make aeroplanes, but we are the only ones who make submarines for ourselves.

**Ruth Smeeth:** My hon. Friend speaks with authority about his constituents and their work in Barrow.

As I was saying, that loss of skills was not just a national embarrassment. The erosion of capability can have serious and long-lasting consequences for our sovereign military capability. Let us not repeat previous mistakes. Let us develop a comprehensive industrial strategy for our defence aerospace sector, and ensure a steady drumbeat of orders to maximise the benefits of an already highly successful exports market.

Central to that strategy must be a forward-thinking plan that starts to consider what a post F-35 future may look like. We need commitment to the development of a sixth-generation combat fighter, to ensure that we have a British option for our next multi-role air defence asset. It will not surprise Members to know that the development of both the Typhoon and the F-35 projects took two decades from concept stage to mass production. We need to commit now to developing that new platform with a view to the finished product entering service in the 2030s—I will still be a young Member.

We should also use that project as an opportunity for a realignment away from a US-led development process, and turn towards our partners in Europe. The F-35 is an exemplary piece of kit, and we should be proud of our involvement in its development. If we are to maximise the benefits for our domestic defence aerospace industry, we must play a lead role in the development and construction of the sixth-generation fighter, and not operate in the long shadow of the US military industrial complex.

Finally, a defence aerospace industrial strategy sends a message to the world that we are serious about our future defence commitments, as well as our long-term security and that of our allies, and it provides us with opportunities to build lasting relationships with international partners. It would also demonstrate that the UK may be leaving the European Union, but we are not leaving the world and we are open for business.

When a nation develops an over-reliance on foreign imports for its defence capabilities, that does not just impact on jobs and industries; it also sends a signal to

the world about that nation's lack of confidence in its own industry and society. Put simply, great nations become great by acting as though they are. If we put our faith, and our active, long-term support, into our domestic defence aerospace industry, it will show the world that we are leaders in the field and intend to keep it that way. The time is right for the development of this strategy. Industry is willing; the military are wanting. What we need now is Government action.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. We have very little time so there will be a time limit of four minutes.

3.58 pm

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): In the run-up to this debate, which was so ably introduced by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth)—a star of the Defence Committee—I and no doubt other members of the Committee were almost inundated with communications from defence companies that wanted to showcase how much they do for industry in this country. For example, Boeing UK wanted to draw attention to its 18,700 workers in the UK. MBDA, the missile specialists, wanted to draw attention to the £1 billion of annual sales that it generates. BAE Systems, however, is in a rather special position. It has over 83,000 employees in 40 countries. It describes itself as a global leader in making and supporting combat aircraft and states:

“If we are to sustain this leading position, a government commitment to the development of a next generation of combat aircraft”—

precisely as the hon. Lady just said—

“would be of immense value to the industry.”

The Government are committed to an industrial strategy process, with a defence sector deal as a component of that. The question is whether that is sufficient or if we need a separate strategy. It seems rather strange that when we have a separate national shipbuilding strategy—shipbuilding, for all its valuable potential for export, does not even begin to approach the potential and actual magnitude of aerospace industry exports—we should want to subsume a strategy for the aerospace industry under a general industrial strategy.

In the case of the joint strike fighter—the Lightning II, which has been referred to—we provide parts for all the aircraft that are built, but only sections of the aircraft. As valuable as that may be, it is not enough to sustain our importance as a prime integrator with all the supplying companies that depend on that process.

The industry is asking the Government to think ahead and to make advance investment so that we will be able to be in the van of future development in aircraft, but I believe that requests for investment have to be a two-way process. For example, it is not just BAE Systems asking for this; Rolls-Royce itself says that the current research and development investment in future combat engine capability ceases at the end of 2017. I would therefore just say this: if these companies want the Government and the country to invest in the future of the industry, we are entitled to say to them, “You need to invest in the future of the workforce.” As I

pointed out in proceedings on the urgent question about the BAE Systems redundancies on 10 October, BAE Systems is a giant company enjoying a

“near monopoly position in many parts of the British defence procurement structure.”—[*Official Report*, 10 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 169.]

It should therefore be working, in the closest possible co-operation, with the Government to see whether job losses can be mitigated. It is a two-way process; we need the companies to invest in the workforce.

4.2 pm

**John Woodcock** (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): It is, as always, a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis). Let me add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) on securing the debate.

The right hon. Gentleman is right about the need for collaboration. However, the uncertainty, which I hope the Minister will be able to clear up, is about the extent of the Government's commitment to the future of aerospace. As a country, we are in a parlous position. A slowdown is affecting many of Barrow's neighbouring constituencies in the north-west, with the prospect of job losses. There is uncertainty over future orders for which, as my hon. Friend said, the export market remains absolutely key. There is also a big question mark over the determination and even the capacity of the Ministry of Defence to look forwards and do the necessary planning.

If this were about aerospace alone, it would be concerning enough, for all the reasons set out so adeptly by my hon. Friend: the massive contribution aerospace makes to our overall industrial base; the advanced manufacturing jobs it brings; the contribution of its capability to our country; and its defence engagement role in being able to underpin our strategic defence relationships with key partner nations. However, it is in not only aerospace where this vital forward look that the Government need to be doing could be stalling. I was alarmed to hear recently that the key spending on the Government's future submarine programme, the unfortunately titled MUFC—maritime underwater future capability—had been cut without explanation. That creates the impression that the Government think they are about to hit a wall due to the comparative spending restrictions imposed and the build-up of capabilities. When Conservative Members were in opposition, they criticised—understandably at times—the last Labour Government for shifting projects to the right, yet it appears that an alarming number of projects might be going the same way.

We have the sense that the Government, having lauded the aim of balancing the books, as they spuriously put it, and of looking to the future, are now going back into crisis mode—just getting from one Budget to another. When future planning suffers, it is not only an problem for our future capability, because we end up with inferior capability now, potentially buying off the shelves, meaning that we spend much more and lose jobs. The Government have a window in which they can acknowledge the problems and concerns that are building up before putting them right, and I hope that the Minister will do that today.

4.6 pm

**Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): The whole defence procurement sector, and especially the defence aerospace industry, has a huge role to play in supporting employment, exports and growth, but our sovereign defence capability, in the national interest, must lie at the heart of the decisions we make and at the centre of the Government's defence policy. We therefore need a defence aerospace industrial strategy that takes into account the practical needs of our armed forces. Recent and ongoing operations to counter Daesh, as well as humanitarian efforts in the wake of Hurricane Irma, have shown how our modern, powerful and flexible armed forces are vital to our national strategic interest and our place in the world.

It is not sufficient, however, just to ensure we have capability today and in the short term to enable the RAF to defend our skies, fight our enemies, and aid our friends and allies. We must also have the sovereign skills capacity to continue to manufacture platforms and to innovate in Britain far into future. The skills that are needed to continue to develop high-tech, world-leading aerospace platforms are already present across this country, particularly in my constituency, which has Airbus, Boeing, Rolls-Royce and BAE, among many others. We must, however, work hard to maintain and, crucially, to enhance and develop these skills. There is a serious shortage of skilled engineers and scientists, and we must avoid ever being forced to rely entirely on expertise from abroad.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin)**: Does my hon. Friend welcome this week's announcement at the Dubai airshow that Airbus has struck its single biggest aircraft order ever—for 430 A320neo jets? That is great news for the workforce.

**Jack Lopresti**: I am obviously delighted and thrilled. That excellent news will help to secure jobs in my constituency and elsewhere in the country.

As I have said in previous debates, the defence and aerospace companies I have met and engaged with over many years are clear that without long-term procurement commitments, Britain will start to lose the skills that we have worked so hard to nurture and develop. To illustrate the long-term nature of this issue, it is worth remembering that equipment used in the 2011 Libyan intervention derived from research and development that started in the 1970s. We cannot fall prey to short-term decision making on the basis of the current defence and budgetary landscape yet still expect to find a skilled defence and aerospace workforce in the future when we need it most.

I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), for writing to update me on the progress that his Department is making on a replacement for the Typhoon. I am sure that that will be welcomed by companies in the defence and aerospace industries such as Rolls-Royce and BAE Systems throughout the country, but particularly in my constituency. The Minister informed me that the preparatory work for the procurement process had begun. The future combat air system—FCAS—will be vital to support our defence and aerospace skills base. Most importantly of all, it will be vital to the maintaining of our sovereign defence capability, our export opportunities and our place in the world.

Alongside such procurement commitments, it is important that we support and maintain the excellent work of a number of defence aerospace companies to encourage apprenticeships and graduate programmes. Those will help to secure our skills base, as well as providing excellent opportunities for young talent and, of course, enhancing our country's social mobility. The 5% club, in which companies undertake to ensure that 5% of their UK workforce will be either apprentices or students in structured programmes, is a very welcome scheme. I commend it to all the other manufacturers in my constituency, and indeed to manufacturers throughout the country. I also welcome the efforts of Airbus in particular, as well as others in the sector, to engage directly with universities and university technical colleges, and to invest heavily in highly skilled research and development across the country.

However, our sovereign defence requirements, and the requirements of our skilled industries, extend beyond the FCAS. I urge the Government to consider a wide range of equipment and research opportunities for inclusion in any future defence aerospace industrial strategy. A comprehensive approach is required to ensure that our armed forces remain equipped with the best possible technology, and that our country has the skills base to design, build and continue to develop that technology.

4.11 pm

**Vernon Coaker** (Gedling) (Lab): Every Member has the best interests of our country's defence at heart. The challenge to the Minister is not being made in a partisan way, but it is necessary because we want to hold the Government to account in this regard.

Let me say—in the presence of the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), and some of the other Committee members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), who initiated the debate—that I think some of the evidence that has been given to the Committee over the past few weeks about defence procurement and equipment should be essential reading for all Members. I commend the Committee and its Chair for that.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) that the debate is taking place in the context of a great deal of uncertainty about the entire equipment budget. That uncertainty leaves the Government unsure about how they will fill a gap which requires—depending on whom we believe—considerable sums of money. If we are not careful, we will end up with short-term fixes in relation to medium and longer-term strategic objectives. The aerospace industry is particularly vulnerable in that respect.

Let me quote from the Select Committee's report, which was published this morning. The evidence of General Barrons and Admiral Zambellas was particularly challenging for the Government, but in the context of the debate, I want to quote what was said by Air Marshal Sir Baz North:

“as a juxtaposition, look at our defence exports—80% is in the air sector, yet we do not have an air sector industrial policy to support the very industries that we need to support the platforms at home to sustain those. It's not just about foreign exchange, but about where we find ourselves. People wish to buy our kit, yet we are not joined up and together in terms of supporting that initiative”.

I think that that sums up where we are. Let us take BAE Systems, although of course there are many other defence companies. We have the Typhoon—or the Eurofighter, or whatever we call it—which has been rolled out until 2040. What will happen after that? We are not sure. We have the Hawk jets, which have been given a 2030 deadline that many of us had never heard about until a week or so ago.

My hon. Friends, and others, have asked why we do not use this as an opportunity to sustain the skills and expertise of our workers. Why do we not take this as an opportunity to look at how we might use the newer Hawk T2s, to showcase everything that is best about our industry and our workforce and to retain that sovereign capability? We cannot just see this industry as a tap that is turned on and off; we have to maintain capability and sustain that capability.

Much of that is about exports, but we do not know where this sixth generation combat fighter is coming from. We are uncertain about that, but we all know that certainty is the key to investment and to maintaining skills—through the training and through apprenticeships of future workers. So I say again to the Committee Chair, the right hon. Member for New Forest East, that the evidence to the Committee should be essential reading for everybody. It challenges the Government to get a grip on equipment procurement, of which aerospace is a crucial and dynamic part.

4.16 pm

**Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow so many Members who have spoken with such passion and knowledge on this topic, about which all of us on both sides of the House are dedicated. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate, and the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) for having co-sponsored it with me. I refer the House, too, to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

In 1940, the RAF realised that it was going to need new aircraft and asked North American to look at designing one, and it became the legendary P-51 Mustang. That went from request to first flight in 148 days, and it is fairly trite to say that we cannot do that any longer. That is why I would like this topic to be considered seriously by the Government.

We must think about the kind of capability we will need in the future: what it is going to be, where it is going to come from, what the Air Force needs, and how we are going to get it. The story since 1940—through the period of decline, in many ways, of the individuality of the British aircraft industry—is quite a sad one, and I shall give two examples of what we should try to avoid.

In the '60s, there were three V bombers: there were three different aircraft industries competing, with three excellent designs. Why did we have three excellent designs competing for the same space, with the result that we now have none of those aircraft industries existing on their own?

The Harrier was probably the last great all-British aircraft that we designed, which we sold to the Americans—the AV-8A. We then looked at having an advanced Harrier but ended up pulling out of our own programme. There were a number of reasons for that. Cost was one; the RAF only wanted 60, which was not enough for the

amount of input required. Therefore, we ended up, albeit in a joint programme, essentially buying back from the Americans an anglicised Harrier. The AV-8B—the GR5, GR7 and GR9 we have seen throughout the '80s and '90s—was really an anglicised American aircraft. That is what I want to avoid—seeing brilliant British industry, brilliant British skills and brilliant British technology not having the necessary input because of a lack of looking strategically at where we will go.

**Graham P. Jones** (Hyndburn) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. Will he add that the Typhoon began on the drawing board in 1984 and came into service in 2003? Does that not highlight precisely the problem?

**Robert Courts**: The hon. Gentleman is right. Typhoon, the F-35 and, in my constituency, the A400M have all had a gestation period of between 20 and 30 years, depending on how we cut the initial date. In that case, we need to be looking at what will replace the Typhoon when it is out of service in 2040. It is counterintuitive when we have not got joint strike fighter F-35 in service yet, but we need to consider what will replace it as we are looking now.

Although that is what we must start doing, I do not want us all to become, as we tend to become, fixated on fast jets and on the strike aircraft, because we also have to look at trainers and transport aircraft. We have already referred to the Hawk and we will have to consider that in this mix. I want us to have ambition for aviation, as we all do; I want to see where the fast jet capability will come from in the future, and what will be the transport aircraft in the future, so we know what will be replacing in due course the A400M and the C-17—the Hercules will probably be long gone by then.

We must also think about what we are likely to need. As we all know, it is very inefficient to send a Type 45 destroyer to carry out light patrol activities in the Caribbean when we could be sending a patrol boat. Likewise, if we want a show of force, do we really want to send an F-35 to support troops when there is little or no air threat coming back from the other side? Could we perhaps look at what the Americans are doing? They are considering a light attack aircraft competition at the moment. Could we be doing that? I do not know the answer to that—it is something that the Royal Air Force and the Ministry of Defence will have to consider—but my point is that we have to look at what we are going to need, how we will go about getting it and what the capability is, and then to go forward and look at it from there. We cannot do that unless we have an ambition for aviation.

I have concentrated on other matters, but that is not to take away from the points that others have made about jobs in the industry. There are lots and lots in my constituency who depend on such jobs—at Thales, Boeing, Airbus, RAF Brize Norton and AirTanker, and also at Airbus helicopters near my constituency. I could go on and on. This is all terribly important as well. I am grateful to have had this short time in which to speak, and I hope that I have made my point with force. I should like us to have an aerospace strategy, so that we know where we are going and the ambition for aviation that we all want to see.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. I now have to reduce the time limit to three minutes.

4.20 pm

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) on securing this debate. She has outlined the importance of this industry to the UK economy. The crisis that we face is of the Government's making. In 2010, they came into office and took great capability out, scrapping elements such as Nimrod. Then, in the strategic defence and security review two years ago, the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, tried to put in place a more ambitious programme of development, including the P8 purchase, more unmanned aerial vehicles and the attack helicopter.

The interesting point is that there was no extra money for that programme. It was going to be paid for by efficiencies and property sales. According to the National Audit Office report, the shopping list came to £24.4 billion, and the only extra money was £6.4 billion, which was earmarked to accelerate the in-service date of the F-35. That left the need for £7.3 billion from efficiencies and £10.7 billion from land sales, neither of which have been met. By 2020, £310 million will be met through staff efficiencies, but the drawdown from Germany—which many of us said would cost us—is going to cost £1 billion. This black hole in the equipment programme is of the Government's own making.

Added to that are some ridiculously stupid procurement decisions that have been made in the past couple of years. In the light of Brexit and the plummeting pound, the procurement of the P8 and the Apache will add to the costs. The Minister intervened earlier to announce the importance of orders that had been placed with Airbus. Why did she not give that contract for the P8 to a British company? Boeing has made lots of promises about investing in this country, but I can tell her now that if that had been the other way round, with the US buying a British product, it would not have been done without a clear commitment to a workshare taking place in the USA. We have only to look at the AirTanker contract to see the muscle involved and the way in which it protects jobs in America first, rather than those overseas. The Government are actually adding to the problem.

The simple question is: do the Government want strategic capability for fast jets and certain other sectors? If they do, they are going to have to pay for that. In regard to the Hawk, there is a clear danger that we will be unable to provide fast jet trainers in this country. It used to be an annual thing when I was a Defence Minister for tabloids and Tory MPs to say that the Labour Government were going to scrap the Red Arrows. We never were, but under this Government, there is a danger that that is exactly what will happen if those orders do not come forward. This short-sighted Government are making lots of promises about equipment, but in practice, those promises are not being funded. The problem facing our industry is that, once we get rid of those skills, we cannot turn them back on again like a tap when we require them. We will be out of this industry for good. If we then wanted a Red Arrows display team in the future, it would have to have aircraft from Korea, France or Italy. That would be a damning indictment of this Government.

4.24 pm

**Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): It is a huge privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), and I mean to call him my hon. Friend because we work closely on such matters for North Durham. I also thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) for securing today's debate. Defence aerospace really matters to my constituency, which is the home of Typhoon final assembly and Hawk final assembly. Some 6,000 men and women work at BAE Systems in Warton, with many thousands more working in the supply chain, so I know how important the defence aerospace industrial strategy is.

With just over two and half minutes available to me, I want to focus on several key points. It is a huge privilege to represent a constituency where aircraft are not only designed, developed and built, but exported around the world. I thank the Minister for her support and for the Government's support of work in the incredibly competitive defence export markets, such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman and other countries around the world. Please can we maintain that support? I want to ensure that we continue the development work that we have secured through the memorandum of understanding with France on unmanned aerial combat vehicles and that the technology that arises can be maintained, secured and then put into what will be the sixth generation of aircraft.

The former Prime Minister David Cameron visited my constituency on three occasions, all of them to BAE Systems in Warton. That was how highly he regarded it. On his final visit, he outlined the Government's commitment to a sixth-generation fighter aircraft. I urge the Minister to ensure that we continue to work to make good on that commitment to deliver it, and I say that not just to keep the United Kingdom secure, but as someone who has had the privilege of visiting RAF Akrotiri and has seen Typhoons and Tornados keeping safe the people who are at risk of harm from ISIS.

The defence industrial strategy will also ensure that we have jobs in the UK for the future. The solution is not buying off the shelf, because if we do not have our own strong industrial base, when it comes to working on collaborative programmes such as the F-35, we will not have the technology or the ability to chip in and get an enhanced workshare in the way that we did on the F-35. Having our own ability is absolutely critical. Some of the best people anywhere in the world work in our aviation defence industry, and I am incredibly proud of them. Will the Minister ensure that we do everything we can to support them during an incredibly tough time, with some of them potentially facing redundancies? We are good at this, and Government Members are dedicated to ensuring that our defence industry has a bright future.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. I have to take the time limit down to two minutes.

4.27 pm

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Perhaps it is right and proper if I inform the Chamber at this point that my daughter is a serving officer in the Royal Air Force.

I am new to this brief, but I read the proceedings of the Defence Committee on 25 October with the greatest of interest, and I want to emphasise two points. The first is about the P-8 and our involvement in that aircraft. I suppose that there was nothing else we could do at the time—it was two years ago—but I have to say for the record that I am unhappy that we did not look to British industry to build or develop the aircraft, but perhaps we had no choice. However, let us not make any mistake about our friends in Boeing—I only have to say one word: Bombardier. That situation underlines the crucial importance of a strategy for our future aero-defence industry.

Secondly, to pick up on the point of the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts), let us remember why we won the second world war. In the 1920s, the 1930s and the 1940s, our air defence industry was broadly based, had expertise and was innovative. If one studies one's history, one finds that we actually out-designed and out-built our foes. In that conflict, our aircraft were without question the best in the world. That is what is at stake for the defence of this country. This is extremely important and history speaks to that.

My time is almost finished, Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologise that you were not told that I was the Liberal Democrat defence spokesman, so I shall conclude with this: I represent the Tain weapons range and Cape Wrath, where NATO and our forces practise and drop their weapons. I hope very much to see a sixth-generation fighter aircraft flying over my constituency before they put me in a wooden box and carry me away.

4.29 pm

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): This subject matters fundamentally to me. The Puma squadron is based in my constituency at RAF Benson, and I was concerned by questions over the Puma's future and how that fits into any strategy that we may be thinking of developing. We need to take account of a proper strategy assessment that covers many of the points raised by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) in her initial contribution.

The Puma is not an old aircraft, as is occasionally stated. All the Pumas were found to be in excellent condition, and, in terms of airframe life, there is no impediment to their making the current out-of-service date of 2025, or indeed considerably later. In addition, we only have to look at the contribution that these aircraft have made to operations around the world: whether deploying in Afghanistan in support of Operation Toral or supporting vital aid in the Caribbean following the recent hurricane disasters, the Pumas have shown their enormous ability to be ready for operations within a few hours of arrival, and they make an ideal platform to support special forces. Moreover, Puma 2 has a relatively low operating cost, delivering excellent value for money.

The £260 million contract to upgrade 24 helicopters was noted by the National Audit Office as a programme delivered on time and to cost. I finish with a quotation from Major General Richard Felton:

“Out of all the aircraft I've flown, Puma 2 probably made my jaw drop most.”

4.31 pm

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on securing this debate.

I normally talk up the Royal Navy, but Plymouth is also a proud home to the makers of the gizmos and gyros that support our aerospace and space industries. The clear ask from Members on both sides of the House is for a clear, long-term strategy in which the private sector and the supply chain can invest in the jobs, R and D and skills required to supply our RAF and our fighting forces with the best and most capable equipment to secure our long-term position.

It is important to note that we do not live in benign times. The context of the military world needs to be taken into account in this debate. We are facing a resurgent Russia that is investing in its aerospace and naval power, and we need to keep pace. The aircraft coming on line shortly are formidable, but we need a long-term commitment to ensure that we have a generation to come next. I worry about this country's sovereign defence capabilities being eroded not by long-term thoughtful strategy but by the short-termism that is currently afflicting the Government.

We need to look carefully at this. Just as the Minister told me that the apprentice who builds the last of the Type 26 frigates has not yet been born, I fear there is no such parallel in the aerospace sector. We need to make sure there is one. Having a new Defence Secretary offers the chance of a fresh start not only in the aerospace sector but in reconsidering the cuts to the Royal Navy I have spoken about elsewhere. The opportunity for a fresh start and new thinking could provide certainty for our sector to invest in the jobs and skills we need at the moment.

I fear that at times, despite the aerospace sector's importance to our economy, we have had a victory of tactics over strategy, and I implore the Minister to consider a long-term aerospace strategy that secures the jobs we need.

4.33 pm

**Leo Docherty** (Aldershot) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) for securing this important debate.

My constituency has a historical link to the British defence, aviation and aerospace industry, because in 1908 the first British flight was made by Samuel Cody from Farnborough Heath. He was piloting British Army Aeroplane No. 1, which he had built himself. That was the start of a remarkable industry in and around Farnborough and it leaves a tremendous legacy, including the headquarters of BAE Systems just a few metres from the runway from which Samuel Cody took off.

That sort of courageous innovation needs to be at the heart of our defence, aviation and aerospace strategy, and I fully endorse the calls for such a strategy. Three things are important for a future strategy. First, an element of competition is important so that different providers can bid for work, driving standards up and costs down. Secondly, innovation is crucial, especially in terms of unmanned aerial vehicles and unmanned

[*Leo Docherty*]

combat aerial vehicles—they are now battle-winning, critical capabilities that we need to advance on our own terms. Thirdly, exportability is fundamental. I am very encouraged by the exportability component of the excellent national shipbuilding strategy. I would like to see that sort of ethos in a future defence aviation and aerospace strategy, because being able to export our world-leading defence exports is not just a matter of good commerce and domestic jobs; it is also a matter of our global standing, global reach and global power.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** That was brilliantly quick.

4.35 pm

**Mr Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op):** May I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on securing this debate? On 10 October, I raised an urgent question with the Speaker on the issue of more than 1,000 job losses across Lancashire in the aerospace industry and this was addressed on that occasion. The response was that the jobs could not be maintained, with the principal reason given that there were not enough orders coming through. The hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) said rightly that we are doing quite well on orders from the middle east countries, but the Typhoon is a world-beating aircraft and it should be being sold around the world. Nobody was more angry and upset than me when we did not get the India contract. I am sure there are other contracts where, with good co-operation between Government and the industry, we could do Government-to-Government deals, in order to keep this supply of Typhoons running.

There are two big issues facing the likes of BAE Systems at the moment. One is keeping the current Typhoon work going. It is ticking away slowly; the production lines have been slowed down. That is mainly to do with this not being as saleable as we thought it might be or it not being sold hard enough. The second big issue is one that colleagues have touched on, which is the question relating to a sixth-generation fighter. That has to come, and the elephant in the room seems to be who we collaborate on that with. The Chair of the Defence Committee mentioned that we need to see integrational capability, which we are not getting a great deal of with the F-35. We are not going to get all of this if we do it in partnership with our European neighbours, and the French and the Germans must be prime candidates here. We have to develop that sixth-generation fighter and sell it far better than we have sold the Typhoon to date.

4.37 pm

**Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP):** Let me start by congratulating the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) on making a powerful case for the need a defence aerospace industrial strategy and on getting us all here on a Thursday afternoon. Remarkably, in less than an hour we have heard from the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), and the hon. Members for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), for Witney (Robert Courts),

for North Durham (Mr Jones), for Fylde (Mark Menzies), for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), for Henley (John Howell), for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) and for Preston (Mr Hendrick). There has been consensus across the House on the need for such a strategy.

The BAE Systems announcement in October that it was planning to slow the production on the Typhoon and Hawk jets, resulting in a huge number of job losses, shocked many of us in this place, but with hindsight perhaps we should not have been surprised. Without a defence aerospace industrial strategy there can be no certainty within industry. Of course it is not just the 2,000 BAE Systems workers who will be affected; small and medium-sized enterprises, supply chains and local communities will all feel the impact of this announcement. Importantly, we face losing key skills from this industry, at a time when we should be protecting and developing them. This strategy must look not just at procurement and plans for equipment, but at how we are going to ensure we have the skilled workforce for the future.

Reckless decisions on defence are already affecting the security of the UK. Russian submarine incursions into the waters off Scotland's west coast are reaching levels not seen since the cold war. The former Defence Secretary admitted that himself, warning of an "extraordinary increase" in Russian submarine activity in the north Atlantic when he gave evidence to MPs last month. Despite those warnings, the UK's ability to find the submarines has been drastically hampered since the Nimrod was scrapped seven years ago. In the past few years, we have seen American, Canadian, French and Norwegian aircraft in UK airspace, helping to pick up the slack.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) submitted a written question after a flight-tracking website at the end of last month tracked a friendly aircraft thought to be looking for a vessel. He asked

"which NATO countries provided Maritime Patrol Aircraft for use in UK airspace".

The Minister for the Armed Forces admitted that aircraft from

"United States and Canada were temporarily deployed to RAF Lossiemouth during the period in question."

This is a fundamental problem, and we will have to wait many years for the replacements. In fact, the we believe the P-8s are not going to be available until 2024, meaning that we have another seven years until they will be operational. We can only assume that Russian incursions will continue.

The Government must admit that their actions have an impact. The fall in the value of the pound has exposed the taxpayer to increased spending, and the former National Security Adviser Mark Lyall Grant stated that MOD officials were having to address a funding shortfall well before a final Brexit deal. He said that

"national security cannot be divorced from economic security... Put at its most basic, if the British economy suffers as a result of the prospect or reality of Brexit, then our ability to fund the ambitious 2015 strategic defence and security review will be put at risk, whether we continue to spend 2% of GDP on defence or not."

These matters really must be considered as part of the industrial strategy. We also have to consider the impact of Brexit. The EU provides important opportunities for defence research and innovation, not only through

the single market but through bodies such as the European Defence Agency. The Government must actively explore means to ensure that UK industry can maintain its existing relationship with European counterparts and benefit from collective innovation and joint projects.

The challenge for many companies is to be able to remain globally competitive. This is how an industrial strategy can help, regardless of whether we are talking about defence, aerospace or security. The Government must support investment in future skills and education, promote apprenticeships and technical courses, and build future capability. We need to recognise and support the regional clusters of universities, colleges and companies where collaboration is pushing the boundaries of innovation. Solutions for the defence sector have been applied to the civil aerospace sector, creating the potential for significant new business and economic expansion over the next decade.

We need to focus on collaborative programmes in Europe, the United States, South Americas and Asia if the UK is to continue in its position as a globally competitive player. Any strategy for defence aerospace should ensure that access to the best possible equipment and capabilities for the UK armed forces is safeguarded.

4.43 pm

**Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) on her opening speech. The debate has been important because of the significance of the defence aerospace industry to this country and to our nation's defence. I wish to make two points. The second is about the need for a well-thought-out industrial strategy for the sector. First, though, I wish to address the particular problem that is being experienced with BAE Systems.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Preston (Mr Hendrick) said, in October, BAE Systems announced that up to 1,400 jobs were to be lost in its military aerospace business over the next three years. It has said that the cuts will be implemented by 1 January and will affect managers as well as production line workers. At its aerospace bases at Warton and Samlesbury in Lancashire, where parts for the Eurofighter Typhoon are made and assembled, there will be 750 job losses. In BAE's other aerospace base in Brough in east Yorkshire, there will be a near halving of its workforce to 500. That is all the more difficult to bear because 500 jobs were previously lost at that site four years ago.

Those job losses will have a devastating impact on the individuals affected and their families. It will also hit those communities that have a long tradition of providing workers for the aerospace industry. Moreover, many of these jobs are highly specialised and extremely skilled. Once those skills have been lost to the industry, it will be enormously difficult to replace them, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) quite accurately said.

A few days ago, my hon. Friend the shadow Defence Secretary and other Opposition Members wrote to the new Secretary of State for Defence. The letter made several important points and called on the Government to take action in a number of areas. It refers to the fact that the Hawk advanced jet trainer is currently in use by 18 countries across the world. It is therefore vital that

the UK does its utmost to promote the Hawk aircraft as a good option for other nations as well. Can the Minister tell me what steps the Government are taking to promote the Hawk advanced jet trainer abroad?

As we all know, the Hawk is the aircraft of the iconic Red Arrows. In a few years' time, the Red Arrows will need to renew their Hawks. It makes good sense for the Government to bring forward orders for the new Hawk T2s, so that there can be continuity of manufacture. The Minister for defence procurement will know that there is a precedent for that. The Government have brought forward orders for offshore patrol vessels to fill gaps and to support shipyards and workers. If the Government can do it once, they can do it twice.

There is also the statement of intent with Qatar for the purchase of 24 Typhoons and six Hawk aircraft, which was signed earlier in the year. We want to see that statement of intent firmed up as quickly as is humanly possible. The contract is tremendously important and I would appreciate it if the Minister could update us on any progress that has been made.

The problems that BAE Systems faces at the moment serve to highlight the more general problem of a lack of a defence aerospace industrial strategy. We welcome the fact that—even though rather belatedly—the Government have produced a national shipbuilding strategy, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North mentioned. We argue that a strategy should also be produced for the defence aerospace industry. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) for the way in which he put his case.

Such a strategy should contain a number of elements. For example, there should be: full engagement with industry so that it can develop a more strategic approach to technological development and address the present and future needs of the armed forces; a long-term commitment by the Government to development by the aerospace sector with an emphasis on exports; a long-term perspective to give confidence and certainty, which in turn will encourage business investment; and a perpetual encouragement for industry to develop new, innovative approaches and technologies. That would require Government to allow industry the necessary “room” to develop more blue-sky thinking.

If we look at Britain's national interest, we can see that it cannot be right for us to be buying so many of our capabilities off the shelf from our American allies, as my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) so correctly argued. In place of short-termism and going for a quick fix, the Government should see things in the long term and value the economic contribution that the defence industry makes to the British economy and to the nation's balance of payments.

Let us not forget that defence manufacturers in general, and the aerospace sector in particular, pay corporation tax and employee national insurance, and they have subcontractors and suppliers. In this context, it has been suggested—as the Chair of the Defence Committee mentioned—that there ought to be a Government commitment to at least an examination of the development of a next generation of combat aircraft. It has been suggested that such an aircraft will enter service in the 2030s and replace the Typhoon class aircraft. What is the Government's position on that?

[Wayne David]

We have had a good debate on an important subject. There can be no doubt that it is vital that Britain has a vibrant defence aerospace sector. We have a workforce of which we can be proud and an industry that is full of enthusiasm and commitment. We now need a Government policy that is up to the challenges we face.

4.50 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin):** It gives me great pleasure to respond to this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on securing it. We have heard 14 interesting and compelling Back-Bench contributions, and I will start by picking up on some of the general themes that came from them.

Many hon. Members spoke out on behalf of the incredible work of the BAE workforce in their constituencies. There has been an urgent question on this subject in recent days. The decision was made by the company, and it is currently consulting the workforce. As the Department is its largest customer, I have been in discussions with the company, asking that it looks to avoid any compulsory redundancies. As an employer ourselves, we are also in ongoing discussions regarding staff with the right skills who could fit into our organisation.

On the subject of the unfortunately named MUFC—the maritime underwater future capability—there is no hon. Gentleman who speaks up more for his constituents than the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock). However, I am sure that he would acknowledge that there is a very solid pipeline of work in his constituency for decades to come. That shows the amazing work of those who live and work in his constituency. The maritime underwater future capability project is still ongoing work, and he will have seen some of the wonderfully imaginative recent ideas.

Regarding the Hawk pipeline, I can reassure the House that we continue to work on export opportunities to Kuwait and India. The RAF has 28 of the T2 aircraft, and there is no risk to the Red Arrows. A number of colleagues mentioned the P-8 aircraft. The first of that capability will come into service in 2019, and will be based at RAF Lossiemouth in the north of Scotland, which will be good for the local economy. Some excellent UK companies are in the P-8 supply chain, including Marshall with the fuel tanks, Martin-Baker with the crew seats and General Electric with the weapons pylons.

**Mr Kevan Jones** *rose*—

**Harriett Baldwin:** I will not take any interventions because there is so little time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) spoke eloquently about the excellent Puma squadrons in his constituency. A number of colleagues asked about Typhoons. So far, just over 500 Typhoons have been built, and they are in service and have been ordered by nine countries around the world. There is still a significant pipeline of Typhoons to be built, and the statement of intent was signed with Qatar. Of course, the Government are working as hard as possible to ensure that those and the 12 Hawk aircraft are on contract by the end of the year.

Contributions from across the House have shown that not a corner of our great country is untouched by the nationwide enterprise that is defence aerospace. Indeed, we have a rising defence budget overall, and the strategic defence and security review in 2015 set out a £178 billion equipment plan for the next decade. In the last year for which we have the recorded numbers, 2015-16, the MOD had a spend of over £2 billion with UK aerospace, and that directly sustained over 7,000 jobs. In fact, I am delighted to be able to announce today that we have awarded Babcock three new contracts, worth £160 million, to provide RAF bases across the country with expert support.

As we heard in today's debate, aerospace strikes a real chord with the British public, and we have heard some key reasons for that. There is obviously the historical connection and the fact that we have 100 years of the RAF coming up in the next year. We also know that our country would be a very different place were it not for the immense intervention of air power in world war one and particularly during the battle of Britain in world war two.

The current crop of aerospace experts in the UK has a worldwide leadership reputation. We have some of the most technically advanced and capable aerospace companies in the world. Aerospace is an engine of local and national prosperity. Up to 2,500 UK companies are involved in it, and it generates more than £33 billion of turnover, employing more than 120,000 people, including 26,000 just in research, design and engineering. Interestingly, more than 80% of the sector's production is exported. Of the £64 billion brought into this country through defence-related exports in the last decade, 85% was generated by aerospace, and much of that was from the combat air sector.

Crucially, as the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North mentioned, we are using our kit in places such as Iraq today. A combination of our Tornados and Typhoons has helped to bring Daesh to its knees and liberated millions of people from an evil death cult. I am sure hon. Members will want to join me in paying tribute to all the brave men and women who are currently serving in our aircrews on deployment.

We are absolutely right to celebrate the aerospace sector, but we also need to talk about the future. The Typhoon has been selected by nine national air forces, and we are currently pursuing exports to Bahrain, Belgium, Finland, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and Qatar. Other Typhoon nations are also pursuing export opportunities to other countries.

On the export pipeline, we are looking ahead not just one or two years. We need to look decades ahead, because we know our Typhoon aircraft will go out of service in 2040. The 2015 SDSR allocated a substantial budget over 10 years to the future combat air system technology initiative, precisely to protect and develop key design and engineering skills in our industrial base. The money includes funding for a national technology programme to maintain the UK's position as a global leader in this area. Some of the work to mature other high-end technologies is with France, and some is with the US.

The decision on the future of combat air will require us to decide at some stage to replace the capabilities currently delivered by the Eurofighter Typhoon. It will be a complex decision, involving a clear military requirement

and requiring detailed consideration of the industrial and financial implications. In terms of the timing, the decision will be made in the very early 2020s or sooner to enable a main gate decision on the procurement in or around 2025.

In conclusion, this is a key sector, and we have had a good debate highlighting a number of the issues in it. Our approach to the defence aerospace industry should be about an overall industry strategy, taking into account the business leaders, the educators, the representatives, the unions and the local economy. We must ensure that, whatever the dangers to come, the great industry we have been discussing today flies even higher, faster and further in the future.

4.59 pm

**Ruth Smeeth:** Before I start, may I first apologise to the House? I should have directed everyone to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I thank all hon. Members for participating today, and the Minister for her contribution. I am a little concerned I did not hear the words, "We will have a defence aerospace industrial strategy," and I hope she will return to the House at some point in the next few weeks, after she has consulted colleagues, to inform us of when we will have a defence aerospace industrial strategy.

I thank everyone for the debate. I hope everyone recognises that this is an opportunity to cast renewed light on the need for an industrial strategy, supporting both industry and our colleagues moving forward.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered defence aerospace industrial strategy.

**Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wish to place on record my unreserved apology to the House for my conduct earlier. I was irritated by something that was said, and I allowed my irritation to get the better of me and I approached the Opposition Front Bench. I apologise unreservedly to the Opposition and to the House, and I have apologised to the Member in question. I believe he has accepted my apology.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his courteous and unreserved apology, which is noted by the whole House.

## Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament

5 pm

**The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis):** I beg to move,

That Richard Benyon, Ian Blackford, Caroline Flint, Mr Dominic Grieve, David Hanson, Mr Kevan Jones and Mr Keith Simpson be appointed to the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament under section 1 of the Justice and Security Act 2013.

Under the terms of section 1 of the Justice and Security Act 2013, members of the Intelligence and Security Committee are nominated by the Prime Minister and appointed by the respective House. The Prime Minister has nominated the members, following the required consultations with the Leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition. The House is now being asked to make the appointments in accordance with the Act.

5.1 pm

**Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): I am delighted to welcome the long overdue reconstitution of this Committee and wish it well with its work. It is nice to see at least two of its members in the Chamber this evening.

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): Three.

**Mr Bradshaw:** I do beg my hon. Friend's pardon.

I hope that one of the Committee's early inquiries will be into Russian interference in the UK. As you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, I have been raising questions about this for the past year, during which the evidence of Russian interference in the American presidential election became credible and compelling. Until recently, the UK Government gave every impression of not wanting to talk about it, but mounting evidence on both sides of the Atlantic of covert Russian propaganda and social media activity, and the role of dark money in our democracy, makes it imperative that the Intelligence and Security Committee looks at this as a matter of urgency. The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee has already launched an inquiry and the Electoral Commission is conducting investigations into Russian-backed interference in the referendum, including with regard to social media and the funding of the pro-Brexit campaign and its main financial backer, Arron Banks.

The American investigation into alleged collusion between the Kremlin and the Trump campaign, led by Justice Department special counsel Robert Mueller, has also now reached Britain. The FBI has named Nigel Farage, the former UKIP leader, as a person of interest, and Mueller has indicted a former Trump campaign operative, George Papadopoulos, who had meetings in London with a UK-based academic, Josef Mifsud, to discuss the latter obtaining dirt on Hillary Clinton from the Kremlin. We know that Mr Papadopoulos has had access to British Ministers, and that Professor Mifsud has met the Foreign Secretary, although that was at first denied.

While it is imperative that the Government and their agencies give the fullest help and co-operation to the Culture Committee, the Electoral Commission and the Mueller investigations—although I know this is not his area of responsibility, I would be grateful if the Minister could assure the House that that will be the case, especially as I have been told that the Mueller team was

[Mr Bradshaw]

in London recently and was not happy with the co-operation it was receiving from the UK authorities—it is the Intelligence and Security Committee that has much freer and direct access to our intelligence and security services and can question them directly. That is why its reconstitution is so important.

Despite the mounting evidence of recent months, the Foreign Secretary was still insisting last week that he had seen no evidence of Russian interference, but on Monday the Prime Minister said, or at least implied, something very different in her Mansion House speech. She excoriated the Putin regime for hacking, interfering in elections, and spreading fake news to sow discord in western democracies and threaten our international order.

It would be helpful to the Houses of Parliament and the country as a whole if the Government would end this confusion now. Is Britain among the countries that the Prime Minister had in mind when she made her speech? Indeed, it would be rather odd, given the uniquely disruptive impact of the Brexit vote and Putin's well publicised desire for it, if Britain alone were immune from the Kremlin's intentions. If the Government will not clear this up, I hope the ISC will. I hope that the ISC will also use its good offices to ensure that the Government and all their agencies give every assistance necessary to the other UK bodies investigating these matters and to Robert Mueller's team.

Additionally, I urge the ISC to include the issue of dark money and the role of think-tanks in any of its deliberations on this matter. We know that more than £400,000 was donated during the EU referendum to the Democratic Unionist party by the Constitutional Research Council. The CRC has also given money to hard Brexit-supporting MPs, including the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker). It was reported last week that the fine the Electoral Commission imposed as a result of the DUP donation resulted from a failure to disclose its source. That is not acceptable.

**Liam Byrne** (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making a brilliant and forensic speech, and he is to be commended by us all for pursuing this matter over the past year. Does he agree that a priority for the ISC should be to get to the bottom of whether foreign money was donated to the election campaigns and to the referendum campaign? A gap in the law means that the Electoral Commission is not empowered to investigate foreign actors and foreign money, and their influence on our democracy and this House.

**Mr Bradshaw:** I completely agree with my right hon. Friend. Our legal framework is completely outdated for meeting the challenges that we face.

There is a further issue that I hope the Government will address. They have promised to close the loophole in Northern Ireland, where political donations remain secret for historical reasons, but that is completely unacceptable. It is quite clear that Northern Ireland has recently been used as a channel for such donations. The Government, to their credit, have said that they will change the law. Every single party in Northern Ireland—

except the DUP, I think—believes that such a change should be retrospective. That would allow us to go back to the time of the referendum so that we would know where the money came from, and we could have full confidence in the integrity of our political and democratic process.

I also urge the ISC to look at the Legatum Institute, its relationship with the Government, and the background of its founder and main funder, Christopher Chandler. It should also consider the activities and funding of political organisations such as Conservative Friends of Russia, now renamed as the Westminster Russia Forum.

I come now to my final and perhaps most important point: the relationship between our intelligence and security services and those of our closest ally, America; and the relationship of each with their respective Government. President Trump is at war with his intelligence community. He has made it abundantly clear that he would sooner believe Putin than his own intelligence and security professionals. That is shocking, but it would be even more worrying for us if that breakdown in relations were mirrored here and had a negative impact on the vital work of our agencies and the extent of their co-operation with their US counterparts.

When the news website BuzzFeed ran a series of articles recently about unexplained Russia-related deaths in Britain, its head of investigations, Heidi Blake, was inundated with American intelligence sources complaining that they did not think their British counterparts were taking these incidents seriously. If that is true, it is extremely worrying.

Until recently, British Ministers have gone out of their way to avoid talking about Russian interference. They might have been worried about doing anything that might cast doubt on the legitimacy of the EU referendum result or embarrass President Trump, from whom they hope to get a trade deal to save them from the Brexit disaster.

I hope the ISC, now that it will finally be reconstituted, will be able to reassure itself and this Parliament that our intelligence and security services continue to act freely within the law, unhampered by any narrow political concerns of Ministers, and that their vital co-operation with their US counterparts has not been affected by the breakdown between the latter and their President. This issue goes to the heart of the security and integrity of our democracy and political system, and I wish the members of the Committee well in their important work ahead.

5.9 pm

**Liam Byrne** (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I want briefly to add to the Intelligence and Security Committee's to-do list, because it is important that there should be a rapid study—with conclusions brought to the House, when appropriate—of what is a rapidly emerging 21st century propaganda operation for which a playbook emerged during the elections in Europe and in America, and in our recent referendum campaign. That involves some reasonably sophisticated techniques in fabricating division and discord on social media platforms such as Twitter, which are then imported into social media networks such as Facebook, with significant—often dark—money behind them, to spread messages that are quite simply not true.

The impact of that is often to undermine democracy, and we in the mother of Parliaments have a particular duty to ensure that the new techniques are fully exposed and that commensurate action is taken against them. We have talked about the gaps in our laws, and we must make sure that the disinfectant of sunlight shines right the way through the elections we have had so that those laws can be fixed.

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): I speak not only as a former member of the ISC, but as someone who was involved in the 1980s in trying to counter what were called active measures—the use by the Soviet Union of agents of influence and organisations to try to have an impact on British public opinion. The difference between then and now is that it was then quite easy to expose who was behind the influence operations, but now that is much harder because the internet allows concealment.

Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that one of the main antidotes to the concerns expressed in this debate is that the intelligence agencies, and particularly the new technological arm of GCHQ that deals with the internet, should work to expose who is behind the messages that are coming through? We cannot stop messages getting through, but we can neutralise them by showing up their provenance.

**Liam Byrne:** The right hon. Gentleman is exactly right. There are well-sourced reports that there have been at least two briefings about Russian interference to the Prime Minister, if not the Cabinet. It is not clear what action was taken in response, but it is now quite clear that dark forces have new techniques. We recognise their fingerprints in some of the referendums and elections that have played out in our country and elsewhere, but let us be under no illusion that their job is not done. They will continue to try to influence debates in this House because they want to change the political environment in which we debate the terms of Brexit, for example. The faster the ISC can do its work and expose, in an appropriate way, what is truly going on, the better for all of us.

5.12 pm

**Michael Ellis:** With the leave of the House, I will respond to the debate.

Needless to say, the topics chosen for discussion by any Committee are not a matter for me or any of Her Majesty's Ministers. However, the first point to make is that the Government recognise the need to protect the reliability and objectivity of information, which is an essential component of democracy. That is why Her Majesty's Government are working with the industry to ensure that high-quality online news media have a sustainable future, and that so-called fake news is not commercially incentivised. It is important to make the point that significant work is being done on that.

On the points about alleged electoral abuse, there has much talk for some time about Russian interference in democratic processes both in the United Kingdom and overseas. In response, the United Kingdom has been proactive. It has actively engaged international partners and civil society to tackle the Kremlin's use of disinformation and propaganda. However, it is the United Kingdom's very robust, free, wide-ranging, vibrant and varied media landscape that is our key defence against disinformation. To date, as has been said, we have not seen evidence of successful interference in democratic processes in the United Kingdom. Naturally, we would take robust action should there be evidence of such interference.

If there are any other points on which Members think I can be of further assistance, they should feel free to write to me, and I will certainly see to it that inquiries are made of the relevant Departments. Interesting points have been made in these contributions, and I very much look forward to seeing the fruits of the deliberations of this important Committee.

*Question put and agreed to.*

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

*Ordered,*

That Mr Richard Bacon, Jack Brereton, Mr Nicholas Brown, Martyn Day, Clive Efford, Julian Knight and Sir Edward Leigh be appointed, and that James Cartlidge and Ian Murray be discharged as members of the Public Accounts Commission under section 2(2)(c) of the National Audit Act 1983.—(*Michael Ellis.*)

## Child Maintenance Service

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)*

5.15 pm

**Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is perhaps not surprising that while Brexit dominates most political debate, issues of huge importance sometimes slip through the scrutiny of this place, and I believe that the Child Maintenance Service falls into that category. After several months of working through the formalities of this House, I am delighted finally to have the opportunity to raise my concerns and highlight in the Chamber the real struggles faced by my constituents.

My constituency office has dealt with a huge variety of problems with the Child Maintenance Service, including the tax on survivors of domestic violence—the Minister may be aware of that issue since I have been campaigning on it for some time. I would also like to raise further constituency cases beyond that campaign, and I hope that the Minister will respond to my remarks.

The Child Maintenance Service was established in 2012 to replace the Child Support Agency—an organisation that was arguably worse. The new system was built on the ethos that children fare better when their parents have a positive relationship. However, that is not the case for all former partners, and some of the ill-judged changes made in the transition to the CMS included glaring oversights in the administration of the system. The stubborn refusal of the Government to acknowledge their mistakes has meant that the current system is not always fit for purpose.

The essence of child support is simple. When both parents are not in a relationship, or if they break up, the child should not suffer financially. For some children, the CMS is their means of avoiding poverty. As a result, that organisation forms one of the most important roles of government—the protection of children. It is therefore vital that such a service should be treated with no less complacency than any other Department.

To allow the CMS to fulfil its important duty, some changes should be made. It currently operates three different payment systems, two of which—the family-based scheme, and the direct pay scheme—operate without charge. The collect and pay scheme, however, has a number of charges. The family-based scheme essentially runs without the involvement of the CMS. Parents can sort out financial arrangements without the bureaucracy of Government interference. It is designed for former partners who can maintain an amicable relationship, and it is the most advantageous scheme for all those involved. It is cost-neutral to the Government, beneficial to the child, and ideally involves no ill-feeling between the parents.

The direct pay scheme is where child maintenance is directed to the receiving parent without using the CMS. That happens after a maintenance calculation has been made by the Department. Parents essentially agree between themselves how and when maintenance will be paid, and the onus is on both parents to monitor the payment and highlight any discrepancies within the agreement. The direct pay scheme does not check whether maintenance has been paid, and neither does it offer any enforcement for either parent. Instead, if the scheme does not work, the CMS offers a move to a managed service—the

collect and pay service. That scheme is available to those who have failed to receive payment, and if there is a reason why someone may not wish to interact with their ex-partner, or if the parent requests to use that scheme, in many cases the CMS can collect child maintenance payments and pass them on to the parent with day-to-day care of the children.

Paying parents must pay a 20% collection fee on top of their usual child maintenance balance, and receiving parents must pay a 4% per cent collection fee that is deducted from their usual child maintenance amount. There is a £20 application charge for the collect and pay scheme, which is waived should the receiving parent be a survivor of domestic abuse. This scheme is the safest of all. Even in this instance, however, the system can be open to exploitation and abuse. The protections include wage deductions and the removal of any possible contact with an abusive partner. As the Minister will know, one of the biggest barriers to independence for survivors of domestic abuse is financial control, which is why it is welcome that the £20 application fee for the collect and pay scheme is waived for survivors of domestic abuse.

I welcome the waiver, but it leads to the question that if the collect and pay scheme is the most secure mechanism for survivors of domestic abuse to exercise their right to child maintenance, and is free to apply, why is there an ongoing monthly charge for the survivors' continued safety? The 4% collection charge is removed from the child's entitlement. This is support that the Government have already determined through their calculations that a child is due, yet they see fit to remove it, taking vital financial support from families and penalising children.

In previous correspondence with the Minister's Department, I was informed that the charges were to cover administering the cost of the service and to incentivise the use of other schemes within the CMS. Logically, however, that runs counter to the Government's removal of the £20 charge. The Minister is essentially saying that the initial charges are intended to incentivise the use of other schemes, but the ongoing monthly, and more costly, charges are there to penalise those where this is not possible. I am sure that that is not the intention, but the Government are using the charges to encourage some of the most vulnerable individuals in the country to engage with their abusive ex-partners and to rely on Government bureaucracy or worse. That is unacceptable and it must stop.

The 4% tax on survivors of domestic abuse has rightly caused major concern with support groups and charities, including Women's Aid, the White Ribbon Campaign, Gingerbread, Engender and One Parent Families Scotland. Those organisations all signed a letter in March this year, alongside Members from every party in this House with the exception of Government Members, calling for the abolition of the tax. Since then, the Government have lost their majority and this could carry the majority of the House. I therefore implore the Minister to do the right thing by vulnerable parents and send a message that the Child Maintenance Service should be a place of safety and security where individuals can exercise their right to child maintenance without fear of recurring abuse. I have been campaigning for this change for some time and have heard many weak excuses from the Department for its inaction. If the Minister in his reply plans to give me some of the

same lines I have heard in the past, let me assure him that I have heard them all before. Let me try to counter them in advance and save him some time.

The Government have consistently advised me that the direct pay scheme is a safe scheme and that the collect and pay scheme is the best way to ensure that both parties are protected. The Prime Minister has told me that users can utilise anonymous sort codes and therefore hide their location and that, if a payment is not made, the domestic abuse survivor can move on to the collect and pay service. Let me tell the Minister why that answer is at best careless and at worst negligent. Giving abusers access to communication with their former partners through bank transfers, and the ability to leave messages while doing so, continues the cycle of abuse. Allowing abusers to pay late without fear of enforcement also continues the cycle of abuse. The system is open to exploitation and abuse, and I hope the Minister will take that into consideration.

Finally, while the collect and pay service offers the protection required, the charges come into play if a domestic abuse survivor is moved on to it. I am sure that that is not the intention. There is no way, even by the Government's logic, that a survivor of domestic abuse can escape the tax applied by the Government without subjecting themselves to the possibility of continued abuse. Surely the Minister would agree that that is a flaw in the system? It must be reviewed and addressed accordingly.

Another argument proposed by the Conservative party is that the tax is so small that it does not matter. I would question whether it is the place of the Government to define what matters and what constitutes small or large. Is it the place of the Government to define what is materially impactful when vulnerable families rely on the service? In response to a letter, the former Minister highlighted the fact that the 4% charge was "minuscule" and, in her interpretation, was not materially impactful. That is not a position I would expect of a Minister. I would expect the Minister to listen and adopt the views of Opposition Members as well as Government Members.

I believe that the Minister's response is contemptible at best, and I seek a better response from the Department. I want to raise two points. First, if it is not materially impactful, why apply it at all? Secondly, it might not have a huge effect on the Government's budget, but for families living on the breadline, every penny counts. In advance of next week's Budget, I ask the Government to consider who needs the 4% of child maintenance more—a family who will feel its material impact or the Treasury, which will not? I hope he will feed that back to the Chancellor along with my determination that the tax be scrapped.

The Government consider it a success that more people are using the systems outside the intervention of the CMS, but with one third of those applying for children maintenance citing domestic abuse as the reason, I wonder how many individuals are being put at risk to avoid these punitive charges. The CMS should be protecting, not punishing, those who have fled domestic abuse. It is time that the tax was scrapped. I have spoken at length about the domestic abuse survivors tax—an issue I have campaigned on and which needs attention—but it is just one aspect of the service that is not working, yet, as much of my constituency casework shows, it could very easily be addressed.

I wish to highlight a few further issues with the CMS, and I hope that the Minister will be able to respond. Several issues with its administration have clearly had an impact on my constituents. One of them had been in an abusive relationship but managed to cut off all contact while receiving maintenance for their child. However, the Department sent her a letter meant for her ex-partner, which caused her great concern, as she was worried that he would get mail meant for her and find out her new location. It is unacceptable that a simple administrative error could strike such fear and alarm into an individual and that any Department, no matter how easily administrative errors might occur, could allow someone to feel endangered in that way.

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I rise to mention the case of lady in my constituency who approached the CSA back in 2005 and was assessed as only getting £18 a week. Eventually in 2013, after multiple letters and failures, it recognised that it should have been £68 a week. By that time, though, there were nearly £20,000 of arrears. That woman has been left in debt, and until recently we were told that the arrears would be cleared over the coming 15 years. By then, she would have been left servicing debt for 27 years. We have managed to get it sorted, but the idea that someone could write back to a woman who has raised children for 12 years on her own and say, "Don't worry. In 15 years, it'll be cleared," shows a lack of comprehension of the real world.

**Angela Crawley:** I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend that such errors, so glaring and so obvious, should be addressed by the Government.

The service levels offered to my constituents are often inconsistent, and CMS rules are often not followed by departmental staff. For example, requests to use the collect and pay service are often discouraged by advisers. I have previously raised the case of a constituent whose ex-partner was falling behind on payments and had requested to be put on the collect and pay scheme. She was told by a CMS adviser that this was not possible because the shortfall in payments was less than 10%. My constituent had not heard of this rule and, on asking where this was written in the legislation, was told to look it up herself.

I could not find it written down anywhere either, and on questioning the Department, I was informed that it was not policy. Will the Minister tell me if there are targets for staff to keep people off collect and pay? I sincerely hope that there are not. If not, why are excuses being made not to use the scheme? In calculating the amount owed by the paying parent, income details are taken from HMRC, but they are not always taken from the most recent tax year. In fact, HMRC can use historic income data from any year in the past six for which it considers it has complete details.

While this might work for most people, as was outlined in correspondence with the Department, it fails those who are self-employed or who tend to work on a contractual basis. For those people, income figures can vary dramatically year on year, so the calculation often does not reflect real incomes. The CMS system of annual reviews does not work for contractors, particularly when the annual review takes place before the end of the tax year. That simply causes more issues, with CMS

[Angela Crawley]

payments being calculated on the basis of inaccurate income figures. There is currently no facility for a mid-year adjustment, and I ask for that aspect of the policy to be reviewed.

An additional failure in the system of calculation is that, should a contractor submit payslips to try to prove current income, the amount shown on them is extrapolated to produce an estimated annual income. The contracts are often, by nature, short-term, and a few months of high income may be followed by months of no work. This is what happened to my constituent George Gillan, from Carlisle. As the Minister knows, I have written to one of his colleagues about it.

George worked offshore on a contractual basis, with a high income during the months when he was working, which were followed by periods when he could live on those earnings when out of work. At present, the CMS is calculating his payments on the basis of income from the tax year ending April 2015. George tried to submit evidence of a change in his circumstances by sending 12 weeks of payslips, but that was extrapolated across the whole year. The total estimated income did not breach the 25% threshold for a new calculation, so it could not be changed.

That left my constituent owing payments that he simply could not afford to make. His annual review takes place in February, and because a mid-year adjustment could not be offered, he cannot afford to take short-term contracts, as he will be expected to make payments based on his higher income from 2015. He has not worked since December 2016, because he is fearful that he will be penalised on that contractual basis. If mid-year adjustments were possible—I hope the Minister will consider them—things would be much easier for those who are self-employed or work on a contractual basis. I hope the Minister will agree that that would be an easy accommodation to make. There is a fundamental flaw in the current procedure for identifying accurate income details, especially those of contractual workers.

I am sure that I have given the Minister more than enough material to respond to, but Members and the public will know there are many issues I have not been able to cover today. Let me recap. I am asking the Minister to make the system fairer for survivors of domestic abuse by scrapping the 4% tax for those who use the collect and pay service. I am asking him to address the administrative problems that plague the CMS. I am asking him to ensure that its service is managed to a high standard and that policies are clear and correctly interpreted by staff. I am asking him to ensure that the CMS works for contractual workers by allowing accurate income details to be taken and allowing for mid-year adjustments. I realise that it is difficult for policy changes to be made, but I hope that the Minister will give serious consideration to some of the injustices that my constituents and people across the country have experienced in their dealings with the CMS.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak. It took me rather a long time to secure the debate. I urge the Minister to take my pleas on board and to seek to improve the system to protect and support families, which is what the Child Maintenance Service should be doing.

5.33 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) on securing the debate. There was a debate on the subject in April, but this is the first debate that the hon. Lady has been able to secure. I thank the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) for her contribution. Let me deal with that at the outset. The Minister with responsibility for the policy would very much like to know about any specifics of what is clearly a very regrettable story of illness.

**Dr Whitford:** I had a meeting with the appropriate Minister earlier this week, and it has been found that the person who should pay has money to pay, but if that had not been the case, the response would have been “another 15 years”, which seems inhuman to me.

**Guy Opperman:** I am very pleased that my colleague the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinage), has met the hon. Lady and has the matter in hand. I am sure that she will be addressing both the individual case and the long-term issue of assessments made on that basis. I should pass on her apologies. I am not the responsible policy Minister, but my hon. Friend has been answering a three-hour debate in Westminster Hall this afternoon on the support that the Department for Work and Pensions offers care leavers, so asked me to step in on her behalf.

I also apologise if the letter in relation to the constituent identified with the self-employed issue had not reached the hon. Lady. My understanding is that it was sent on Tuesday. I was able to hand-deliver it today, but I offer my apologies if it had not made it into the hon. Lady's hands prior to that. Clearly, there are answers to some of the points in relation to the self-employed in the letter, but if, upon sober and long-term perusal of that letter, the hon. Lady wishes to respond, I am sure that the correspondence can be continued.

I will briefly set out the Government's approach to the Child Maintenance Service. The Department has since 2012 been delivering a comprehensive package of reforms of the child maintenance system, which is intended to support parents to take responsibility for paying for their children's upbringing. For many years, the old system, under the Child Support Agency, did not provide the right support to parents. That is why the Government are closing cases under the Child Support Agency and giving parents the opportunity to apply to the Child Maintenance Service.

The new system run by the Child Maintenance Service is designed to encourage collaboration between parents, which we know has a direct positive impact on child outcomes, including health, emotional wellbeing and academic attainment. Parents can obtain free advice and support from the Child Maintenance Options service on making an arrangement that is right for them, whether that is a family-based arrangement or a statutory one.

More than a quarter of those who have contacted Child Maintenance Options have a family-based arrangement, and 82% of these arrangements are effective. The charges introduced in 2014 provide a further incentive

for parents to consider making a family-based arrangement. The total income from fees and charges is less than 10% of the costs of providing the service, which remains heavily subsidised by the taxpayer. The statutory scheme is available for those who are unable to set up a family-based arrangement. These parents are therefore most likely to have conflict and difficulties meeting their child maintenance responsibilities.

There is a range of strong enforcement powers, and the Government are ramping up the usage of them. We aim to take immediate action to re-establish compliance wherever a parent fails to pay what they owe. In June 2017 the Government instigated 550 more enforcement actions than in June 2016, and the intake of cases to civil enforcement increased by 670 on the previous year.

Last month, we announced plans for new legislation to allow deductions to be made from jointly held bank accounts, closing a loophole that allowed a small minority of parents to cheat their way out of paying towards their children. Our efforts on compliance and debt recovery are firmly focused on helping today's children. We have continued to uphold this principle since it was set out in the arrears and compliance strategy in January 2013.

We have also been frank about the shortcomings of the previous Child Support Agency schemes, which included the build-up of debt through unpaid maintenance payments, and the Department is currently working on a new strategy that will maintain the principle of focusing our efforts on collecting money for today's children while looking at creative and innovative ways to maximise compliance in the system.

This new system introduced simplified calculations and increased automation, allowing cases to be processed with a higher level of accuracy than under previous schemes. Additionally, survey data published in December 2016 showed that 91% of parents receiving payments through a direct pay arrangement were receiving all or most of the maintenance due to them. The most recent statistics show that 85% of new applications were cleared within 12 weeks and 81% of change of circumstances actions on live cases were cleared within 28 days, and the level of complaints received remains extremely low, at less than 0.1 % of the case load. No one is complacent, but in the grand scheme of things, 0.1% is relatively low. The caseload on the Child Maintenance Service is still growing, however, and we are taking every opportunity to maintain compliance and deal with non-compliance before enforcement action is needed. We are continuing to increase the operational resources allocated to enforcement, with 290 full-time enforcement case managers in place as of September 2017.

Turning to fees and charges, the one-off £20 application fee for the Child Maintenance Service is intended to prompt parents to consider whether they can make a family-based arrangement. We want to help parents to reduce levels of conflict after a separation and work together more effectively, as we know that this is in the best interests of their children. The application fee is waived in three cases: for the most vulnerable clients; for applicants who are under 19 years of age; and for those who have been victims of domestic abuse. For parents who need to use the statutory scheme, there are no further charges for using the direct pay service,

where parents manage payments between themselves. I will go into the direct pay service in a bit more detail later.

Collection charges apply only to the collect and pay service and are intended to encourage both parents to collaborate. The 4% charge for receiving parents ensures that both parents have an incentive to work together and to try direct pay. The collection charge for the receiving parent is deducted only when maintenance is paid, so they do not owe money to the Child Maintenance Service if maintenance is not paid. In addition, charges make a modest contribution to the cost of running an expensive service, which remains heavily subsidised by the taxpayer.

In relation to domestic abuse cases, the Department is committed to ensuring that victims of domestic abuse get the support they need to use the Child Maintenance Service. I have explained about the waiver of the £20 application fee, and the fact that the more expensive enforcement charges are levied on the paying parent. Where a direct pay arrangement is in place, no fees are required. Research from the 30-month review published in December 2016 showed that receiving parents who had experienced domestic abuse were just as likely to have an effective direct pay arrangement as other receiving parents. We are supporting those parents to use the direct pay service safely without having contact with an ex-partner by: facilitating the exchange of bank details; ensuring that personal information is not shared; and providing information about setting up bank accounts with a centralised—rather than personalised—sort code which does not allow parents to be traced. I have very much taken on board the hon. Lady's suggestion about bank transfer messages, and I will ensure that the Minister looks into that and gets back to her, in respect of that matter and any others that I have not addressed in the limited time available today.

In addition, we have worked with stakeholders to develop a new training package to ensure that all caseworkers are able to understand and recognise domestic abuse and respond appropriately to clients who are victims of abuse. This training has been piloted and is being rolled out nationally from September 2017. The Government are genuinely committed to continued evaluation of the effects of the child maintenance reforms, including the impact of charging. We will continue to consider our current position in the light of any further evidence that our evaluations produce.

I want to touch briefly on the 30-month review, which included the report on the impact of charging that was published in August 2017. The review consists of a series of independently conducted and internal research reports, official statistics and administrative data. The survey data showed that most direct pay arrangements were in force 13 months after the original direct pay calculation, and that 91% of parents who were receiving payments through a direct pay arrangement were receiving all or most of the maintenance due to them. I accept the need for continued evaluation of the impact of charging as we complete the Child Support Agency case closure process.

If there are any specifics that I have not addressed, I will ensure that the Minister who holds the portfolio responds to them. I want to make it clear that there are no targets to keep people from moving from collect and

[Guy Opperman]

pay. I reassure the hon. Lady that the Government are absolutely committed to promoting parental responsibility and collaboration and to providing an efficient, effective statutory scheme to be used as a last resort. Our priorities remain ensuring that as many families as possible have effective arrangements in place that are appropriate for

their circumstances and taking action to maintain compliance in the statutory scheme, so that today's children can benefit from maintenance payments.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.45 pm

*House adjourned.*





# Westminster Hall

Thursday 16 November 2017

[PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

## BACKBENCH BUSINESS

### World Antibiotics Awareness Week

1.30 pm

**Julian Sturdy** (York Outer) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered World Antibiotics Awareness Week.

It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. Exactly one century ago, Ernest Rutherford split the atom and humanity entered the nuclear age. The groundbreaking discovery represented a momentous step forward for human progress, but at the same time it unleashed a challenge for those beyond the laboratory and academia—the avoidance of mutual assured destruction. As this debate is about World Antibiotics Awareness Week, some might wonder why I started with the splitting of the atom, but I believe that there is an equally strong argument for the aforementioned period to be referred to as the antibiotic age. It was 11 years after the splitting of the atom that Sir Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin, here in this very city of London.

No one can deny the profound impact of antibiotics on medicine, and their widespread use represents a watershed moment in our evolutionary story. However, as Fleming himself understood, shortly after making his discovery, giant leaps in scientific progress produced wholly new challenges. As antibiotics were readily available, it appeared that we had invented miracle drugs of sorts. The snag is that we now face the real and severe threat of antimicrobial resistance.

Across the globe this week, scientists and healthcare professionals are hosting a wide range of events to make antibiotic resistance a globally recognised health issue. I am delighted that we as parliamentarians are here today to represent the role that lawmakers and Governments will play in facing the challenge of antibiotic and antimicrobial resistance. The week is also intended to raise awareness of the need to preserve the power of antibiotics through appropriate use, to increase recognition that individuals, health and agricultural professionals, and Governments must play in tackling antibiotic resistance, and to encourage behavioural change and convey the message that simple actions can make a difference.

While the threat of antibiotic resistance is often considered a doomsday scenario—one might say a medical Armageddon—we must remember that that menace is all too deadly today. Currently, 700,000 people die each year from drug-resistant infections; the future threat is touted as being so severe and extreme, not because we are not living with the effects today but because of the truly appalling potential scale of the problem if we do not take co-ordinated action. If we do not act now, antimicrobial resistance will be responsible for 10 million deaths per year by 2050. That is more than the number of people worldwide who were killed by cancer in 2015.

It is nearly impossible to put a number on the lives that have been saved by antibiotics; some sources put the figure at roughly 2 million, but it is entirely conceivable that we may arrive at a position where the balance tips, and antibiotics pose a greater threat than a remedy.

As I have said previously in this House, we run the risk of returning to a medical dark age, where routine operations such as hip operations cannot be carried out, and infections that are standard today become deadly. This week, the British Society for Antimicrobial Chemotherapy published a report on behalf of the all-party parliamentary group on antibiotics. The report, the briefing for which has been sent to all Members of the House, considers the AMR action plans and strategies set out by the World Health Organisation, the European Union and the UK, and asks, crucially: “Has the world lived up to the challenge?”

The overarching theme of the report is that future strategies to combat antibiotic resistance should incorporate specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and timely—SMART—targets. When the stakes are 10 million deaths each year within four decades, it is easy to become lost in the scale of response that that merits; but as is so often the case, a coherent and clear approach is our greatest weapon. I call on the Government to ensure that all steps are taken to counter AMR and explicitly to incorporate those SMART targets I listed. I believe there is much to be gained from making that standard practice and removing any doubt. I am sure that colleagues will be encouraged to read in the report that

“the UK has taken significant steps to meet the objectives of the EU Action Plan, which in turn satisfies the WHO Europe Strategic Action Plan.”

There are two aspects, however, where our country needs to up its game. First, we need to address education and public awareness, so it is entirely fitting that we meet today during World Antibiotic Awareness Week, an occasion aimed directly at bolstering an understanding of resistance and the threat it poses to humanity. We need to be forthright in promoting the “four rights” when consuming antibiotics: the right drug, the right dose, the right time and the right duration. A survey carried out across Europe in 2016 indicated that knowledge about AMR remains low, and antibiotic consumption has decreased by only 6% over the last seven years. To address that, the British Society for Antimicrobial Chemotherapy advocates the use of simple and clear language in all awareness-promoting material. There is a direct recommendation of

“monitoring the efficacy of education campaigns through online channels.”

Fleming himself was once quoted as saying that the best remedy for a common cold was a dram of whiskey.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): Hear, hear.

**Julian Sturdy:** I know the Scottish Members would certainly agree with that. As Fleming said, “it’s not very scientific—but it helps.”

We now need to make the message as clear as day: antibiotics are ineffective when taken unnecessarily and doing so bolsters resistance and endangers mankind.

The second area where significant progress can be made is on the incentives for antibiotic discovery, research and development. It should be noted that the antimicrobial

[Julian Sturdy]

challenge is as much economic as it is medical. We must find an alternative to the reimbursement model, whereby profitability of bringing new antibiotics to the marketplace is linked to volume of sales. That is because we are actually seeking to limit the use of such drugs to preserve their power; to use new drugs as a point of last resort, as it were. To use an analogy, it is almost like the fire service—we need it to be there and to be effective, but we do not want to use it. However, nobody would dispute the necessity of investment and funding for that key emergency service.

To overcome this task, it is essential that measures are taken to co-ordinate a review of progress in new drugs, alongside the activation of research and development by industry for new antibiotics and related products achieved by Innovative Medicines Initiative projects. On the economics, we need to seek innovative solutions, with the pricing conditions and “pull” measures needed for the long-term sustainability of new antibiotic development, so that they are promoted. An example of that is the compact initiative of the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations to promote a sustainable business model and adequate conditions for the introduction of effective new antibiotics.

The O’Neill review, published last year and described last week by a columnist from *The Times* as “the best argued and most accessible”

report in his lifetime, was very clear on this matter. Lord O’Neill found that much more needed to be done to close the substantial gap in research and development funding between AMR and the best-funded areas of medical science. The report being launched this week quantifies this further, and states that \$40 billion is needed over 10 years, representing about 0.05% of G20 countries’ current healthcare spend. I will not claim that that sum is insignificant, but it is certainly affordable given the magnitude of the threats we face.

For improvement on a global level, the report makes it clear that co-ordinated efforts must be made in the veterinary sector, where I am pleased that tangible progress has been made in the UK. Figures from the Countryside Alliance show that sales of livestock antibiotics across the sector have fallen by an average of 27%—their lowest levels since records began—which is a good start, because a failure to address AMR in livestock has fundamental implications for the treatment of human diseases. For that reason, mirrored co-operation between Government Departments is essential.

While I am delighted that we are joined by my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Health, this matter also encompasses the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for International Development and the Department for Exiting the European Union. We need a clear commitment from the Government that that co-operation is there and that an interdepartmental strategy is on the agenda. Beyond that, we require what Antibiotic Research UK describes as a “grand alliance” to come together, comprising the Government, the pharmaceutical industry, collective medical research charities and academics.

To reduce further the overall use of antibiotics in the veterinary sector, guidelines have been developed for prudent use. The EU road map also proposed the creation of an animal health legal framework, based on

the principle that prevention is better than the cure. Take the example of colistin. In 2015, evidence emerged of colistin resistance with the potential for transfer and spread between bacterial species. In order to preserve colistin for human medicine and limit the spread of resistant genes, the European Medicines Agency imposed strict limitations on its use and recommended the withdrawal of marketing authorisations for all oral colistin in veterinary medical products. Professor Galloway, from the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow, is calling for a full review of the use of antibiotics used in both animal husbandry and human clinical practices, and I believe the Government should actively consider that suggestion.

In the UK, some sectors have conclusively beaten the target set by the veterinary medicinal products directive. Such industries represent very clearly what we are aiming for with the SMART targets I referred to at the beginning of my speech. In many cases, progress has been made through voluntary schemes. I request that the Government look directly into specific sectors in order to investigate best practice and what we can learn from it.

However, we must go further as a global leader and recognise that this is an international challenge. Almost 80% of antibiotics used in the USA are not taken by people but used within the livestock sector, which I find astonishing. In India, people consume an average of 11 antibiotic tablets per year. Only today, data has been released showing that antibiotic resistance is growing in Europe. Progress that Britain makes will be quite simply irrelevant in the absence of a confident international stewardship programme.

The British Government must act as an example in their commitment to tackling resistance head-on globally and, while I recognise it is not in the specific gift of my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Health to dictate his published ministerial responsibilities, I believe it is timely explicitly to add antimicrobial resistance to those responsibilities. That symbolic act would send a clear message that Britain is committed to remaining at the forefront of the fight against antibiotic resistance.

**Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op):** I share the hon. Gentleman’s concern about the problems with antibiotics, which we see with farm animals. However, there is also now a problem over supply, due to the increased concentration of the pharmaceutical industry—there are new mergers coming along as we talk. Does he think that that is worthy of proper investigation? Those companies can turn the supply on, but they can also turn it off, which can also be life threatening.

**Julian Sturdy:** The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. As I said, we have to encourage new antibiotic discovery. In our current system, the big pharmaceutical companies have been reluctant to come forward and put that money in, because the financial model just does not work.

However, encouragingly, we are now seeing smaller companies and spin-outs—from science departments within medical departments within universities—looking specifically at antibiotic discovery. There is something to be said about that, and again we have to look closely at it, because it could be used to our advantage. I encourage the Government to look at that, I encourage all Members who have a university in their patch to talk

to them and I encourage those who have any of these small companies to visit and talk to them. It is incumbent on us all as parliamentarians to go out there and promote what is happening on our doorstep.

There is no doubt about it: the big pharmaceutical companies are finding it very difficult to promote new antibiotics. It takes 15 years for a new antibiotic to come to the marketplace from the start of the process of discovery. Companies have to make a huge investment. If that investment leads to a drug that is not actually used, because we are using it as a point of last resort, the financial model as it currently sits just does not stack up. That is something we have to address.

The discovery and development of antibiotics should not be seen as a curse. However, we must recognise that responsible steps now need to be taken to ensure that they persist and that we keep resistance firmly locked down. The antibiotic age can remain a golden one, and our collaborative actions can prevent a fall into what has been described by many as a medical abyss without antibiotics.

In the antibiotic age, we are all on the same side. This is not about politics or what the UK can do; it is about global action. That cannot translate into a lack of zeal and an absence of the will to win. I very much look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say. The UK Government have made great steps forward. The O'Neill report was a great start, but we have to continue that, and we have to be world leaders in this. We have a great opportunity to do that, if not for our generation, for future generations.

1.51 pm

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) on securing a debate on such an important issue.

As we heard in my hon. Friend's powerful speech, antimicrobial resistance is a significant and increasing public health threat both here and in the rest of the world. It is estimated that, in the United States and Europe alone, antimicrobial-resistant infections currently cause at least 50,000 deaths a year. We can be proud of the fact that the UK Government have played a world-leading role on this issue. David Cameron was one of the first leaders to put it firmly on the international agenda when he launched the review led by Lord O'Neill in 2014.

Despite that determination and commitment, the effective work that the Government are already engaged in and commitments from many other Governments around the world, I am worried that progress is not fast enough, given the seriousness of the risks we now face. Antibiotics have saved countless lives in the 80 or so years since Alexander Fleming's historic discovery. Ever since their use became widespread in the 1940s, they have ensured that life-threatening infections can be treated effectively and operations that would have previously been very dangerous can be performed safely. Research indicates that the use of antibiotics has probably extended our average life expectancy by around 20 years.

The consequences of antimicrobial resistance are often portrayed as a future threat, but the World Health Organisation is clear that antimicrobial resistance is already detected in all parts of the world and is already

causing serious harm. Across the member states of the European Union, it is estimated that AMR currently costs around €1.5 billion in additional healthcare costs and productivity losses.

Those rather dry sounding points can hide the scale of the potential horror we face. The O'Neill review concluded that more than 300 million people are expected to die prematurely because of drug resistance over the next 35 years. As we heard from my hon. Friend, we could see a return to the days when straightforward operations and minor injuries can routinely result in death and childhood mortality is commonplace.

The chief medical officer, Professor Dame Sally Davies, has rightly described AMR as a "catastrophic threat". She has warned of a "post-antibiotic apocalypse", where 40% of the population die prematurely from infections that we cannot treat. In her view, that could amount to nothing less than

"the end of modern medicine."

The worst-case scenarios are frightening. It is therefore vital that we take action to address the threats we face.

We clearly need to improve infection control, not only in our healthcare facilities here but around the world, and I urge the Minister to make AMR, improving sanitation and infection control a priority for our overseas aid projects. We need to bring an end to the over-prescribing of antibiotics in human medicine. That means doing much more to raise public awareness of this issue, so that more people understand the consequences of demanding antibiotics from their GP even when there is not clear evidence that they are needed or justified. It is imperative that we develop better and more accurate ways to diagnose conditions so that we no longer see so many instances of antibiotics being used in cases of viruses and other conditions where they have no effect.

As my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer said, it is crucial that we take action to end the overuse of antibiotics in agriculture. According to a letter from senior medics to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in 2016, an astonishing 90% of all UK veterinary antibiotic use is for mass medication of groups of farm animals. As we reflect on reform of our agricultural support system in preparing to leave the European Union, the new system of farm support that we introduce must discourage intensive farming practices where animals are kept in overcrowded, unnatural and unhealthy conditions, which leads to routine prophylactic use of antibiotics. We should be promoting much more health-oriented methods of farming. It is possible to maintain a successful farming sector and at the same time significantly reduce levels of antibiotic use, and we have already seen progress in that direction, particularly in the poultry sector.

We need to ensure that we give priority to this area in Government spending on research and development as part of efforts to expand the pool of effective antibiotics. I agree that we should seek a new approach to rewarding and incentivising medical research in this area as a further means to drive forward the search for effective antibiotics. We need also to significantly improve our knowledge and understanding of the scale of antibiotic use and the threat posed by AMR in this country and around the world.

The O'Neill report made 10 recommendations, and I would welcome an update from the Minister today on the progress made on delivering those. I also urge him

[Theresa Villiers]

to make tackling antimicrobial resistance a key element of our public health policy. I hope the Government will press NHS England, local clinical commissioning groups and local authorities to make it a focus of their sustainability and transformation plans. Moreover, tackling AMR should be an important element of our foreign policy and our international aid budget, because it is self-evident that we cannot solve this problem without concerted action on a global basis.

In conclusion, there are many impassioned debates in the House on different subjects, all of which no doubt seem worth while and important at the time. However, there can be few issues of such huge significance as the one we are considering. If we fail to take action and future generations find their lives blighted by the post-antibiotic apocalypse predicted by the chief medical officer, they will look back on debates such as this and their judgment will not be kind. I say to the Minister and to each and every Member of the House that we need to take action now on antimicrobial resistance if we are to safeguard the health and wellbeing of future generations. I urge the Minister to take that message back to his colleagues in Government.

1.59 pm

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): It is a great honour to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) and my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) in this extremely important debate. As my right hon. Friend said, this issue is both important and urgent; it is not something that we can put off.

I declare my interests as a trustee of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, which does research in this area, and as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases, the significance of which I shall come to in a moment.

Both previous speakers outlined the importance of this subject. The O'Neill report said that we are looking at the possibility of 10 million deaths a year and the loss to global GDP. However, I do not want to dwell on that, because I want to talk about how we can make progress. We have to make progress because at the moment it is too slow. As the chief medical officer, Professor Dame Sally Davies, has said, we do not have time. "The Drugs Don't Work", to quote the title of her book.

There are four areas in which we need to make some progress. I do not claim any innovation in this. I listened to a lecture on the issue just last week and these were the four areas set out; I am just repeating what I have heard. The four areas are public education, drug discovery, the involvement of drug companies, and financial mechanisms such as advance market commitments. I shall take them in turn.

First, on public education, it is extremely important that we work together, that we bring the public with us. This country has had a great record over the years in preserving antibiotics for the most essential use, at least in relation to human health. My right hon. Friend described the problems in the animal health sector, but in the area of human health, we have preserved antibiotics. Compared with most countries in the world, we are extremely prudent in our use: doctors do not prescribe them unless they are really needed.

We can do more, however. We can involve the public—citizens—in the search for new antibiotics. I was introduced last week to a great scheme called Swab and Send, which can be looked up on the internet and which is run out of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine now. For a small amount—I think it is £30—people get five swab kits. They are encouraged to send in dust samples or whatever; they are encouraged to swab anywhere in their house where they think interesting cultures might be building up and to send the samples in to be tested in laboratories. I saw some of the results. Young people, children and adults all around the country are sending swabs to Liverpool for them to be tested and cultured to see whether potential new antibiotics can come out of that. The reason for doing it is that, just as with the fortuitous discovery of penicillin, we have, potentially, the answer—it could even lie somewhere in a corner of this room. We do not know, but let us get citizens involved in sending those samples in from all over the country and, indeed, the world and get them tested. We have an army of volunteer scientists and researchers out there who are able to help us to discover the next generation of antibiotics.

The second area is drug discovery. We have heard that it has been extremely difficult to make progress in drug discovery, for a number of reasons. I believe that the last major development was 30 years ago, so we have not had a new antibiotic for 30 years. The problem is that antibiotics are cheap. When drugs are cheap but developing them is expensive—it takes years, we have heard 15 years, and the cost can be in the hundreds of millions of pounds—it is simply not commercially possible for drug companies to engage in this kind of research and development. It needs a combination of public finance and private development and initiative.

At this point, I want to reflect on what has happened in relation to malaria, which I know a little about, over the last 16 or 17 years. The Medicines for Malaria Venture is a fine example of how we can have international co-operation. It supports pharmaceutical companies to develop new medicines for malaria that would not be able to be produced commercially. Seventeen years ago, in 2000, as I know myself having contracted the disease a number of times, the efficacy of standard treatments for malaria was poor, or they were pretty toxic. Resistance to chloroquine, which was the main drug, was high everywhere. Sulfadoxine-pyrimethamine, or SP, which had replaced chloroquine as the main drug in a number of places, was also becoming less effective. New drugs, based on the *Artemisia annua* plant, were emerging, but much more work needed to be done on them. Drugs were available, but they were not particularly well developed, and because they were single therapies, not combination therapies, there was the great risk that resistance to them would occur very quickly.

The Medicines for Malaria Venture was set up with the specific aim of working with companies to bring potential drugs through research and development to the market. I am proud to say that, since 1999, the United Kingdom has been the second largest provider of funding to that excellent organisation after the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which has funded more than half the total expenditure since then, which is something like \$1 billion.

What have we seen as a result of the \$1 billion of expenditure over 17 years? We have seen a transformation. In 2000, there were 10 products around and being

worked on: six at the research stage and four at the translational stage. There was none at the product development stage and none on the market. Where are we now, 17 years later? There are 21 in research, nine at the translational stage, seven at the product development stage and 10 on the market. That is a huge return on investment. Obviously, it was not just the investment of the \$1 billion or so with MMV; it was also investment by private companies working alongside MMV that put a lot of their own money into it.

Now, therefore, we have not only a good range of very effective drugs available globally that have saved millions of lives—one estimate is 6 million; it is possibly more than that—but a very healthy pipeline: 30 drugs at the research and translational stages and another seven at the product development stage. That is exactly what we need to see for antibiotics, and not just in the future but now. There we have a model. It may not be exactly the right model for antibiotics, but it is a model. That shows that it can work and not just in relation to malaria drugs; we have seen it work in relation to drugs for so-called neglected tropical diseases. An equivalent organisation is bringing forward drugs in that area. We have seen it with vaccines. The world has come together to produce better vaccines or more vaccines to cover more diseases through the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation.

We therefore have models for drug discovery, but we need to ensure that they involve the drug companies. This cannot be done just by the public sector. The drug companies have enormous expertise and great researchers; they just need the incentive to work on the development of new antibiotics to a much greater extent. We are not talking about doing one or two; we are talking about looking at dozens and dozens. That is why it needs a co-ordinated and global approach. I think the drug companies are willing. They are out there, they are able to do it and they want to do it; they just need a bit of co-ordination and incentive—a bit of a push—and also the public encouragement that comes from knowing that this is something that we all want to do and that will benefit the entire world.

We need to look at how that finance could be introduced. I have talked about advance market commitments. That is the possibility that has been suggested to me. It has been done before. Just over a decade ago, advance market commitments were developed for vaccines. We have vaccines available around the world now, inoculating children and preventing them from getting debilitating or killer diseases, because of the commitment made by our Government in 2005-06 and other Governments, with again the UK taking the lead. That is an area in which we have expertise and have already shown commitment. Therefore, it is absolutely right, as my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet have said, that the UK should be taking a lead in this. At this time, when perhaps our global position is changing, what could be better than showing global leadership in an area that is of great benefit to all humanity and showing that global Britain is a reality, not just a form of words?

Just a few words on how advance market commitments work. In the case of vaccines—there is no reason why it could not work in the same way for antibiotics—there is an agreement for money to subsidise the purchase of a future drug at a given price, so that people know that

they are going to sell that drug at a certain price, which means that they can invest in the research and development. That gives manufacturers the incentive to invest not only in that R and D, but in capacity. We need to build that capacity. Clearly, in the case of vaccines, that was enormous because vaccine plants are extremely expensive; in the case of antibiotics, the expense would be less, but nevertheless significant. Then there is the agreement that, once a fixed amount of sales, in terms of numbers or value, has been reached, the manufacturer is contractually obliged to sell the drugs affordably in the markets or to license the technology. Let us be frank: these drugs are not going to make large sums of money for people. They have to be available at prices that everybody in the world, whether they get them through a health system or purchase them individually, can afford.

**Theresa Villiers:** Listening to my hon. Friend's speech, it occurs to me that, in other areas of medical research, we see a hugely positive impact from the charitable sector. Should we be trying to read across the lessons from other areas of medical research and to get these fantastically successful charities involved in raising money for AMR research?

**Jeremy Lefroy:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I referred earlier to the involvement of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in the setting up of MMV, but there are so many other medical charities putting millions and sometimes tens of millions of dollars into these areas. That is the beauty of partnerships such as MMV, the Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative and other partnerships: they take money from the commercial sector, charities, non-governmental organisations and from Government and everybody is working together—they are not in competition with each other over relatively scarce resources. The partnerships are using the benefits, in the case of companies, of their researchers and facilities; in the case of foundations, of their contacts, ability to deploy drugs on the ground and funding; and in the case of Governments, of the substantial funding that they can put in.

I want to conclude by saying that this is not pie in the sky—this is something we can do. We have proven in the case of malaria and other diseases that we can achieve tremendous results. We know there is a will. We know Government have a will. We know there is a will in other countries. It just needs a lot more urgency and more co-ordination. If the UK, through the Department of Health, and as my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer has said, through the co-ordination of the various Departments, were to take this by the scruff of the neck, we would have something by which the UK could again show world leadership not just in words, but in actions. I look forward to hearing from the Minister the plans that we have in that area.

2.14 pm

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. At relatively short notice I am standing in for my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), who is not very well. I am not certain of the cause of his illness, but I am sure that if he is seeking advice, he will rightly be following the guidance of the theme of World Antibiotics Awareness Week, which states:

“Seek advice from a qualified healthcare professional before taking antibiotics”.

[Patrick Grady]

He will also be taking the advice, as I am sure will everyone else, of my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who has been impressing on us the importance of the flu jab. I can testify to the medicinal qualities of a hot toddy, from time to time, but in the careful context of appropriate medication with appropriate medical advice.

I congratulate the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) on securing this debate, which gives us an important opportunity to reflect on the issue of antimicrobial resistance and the importance of being aware of the challenges. It is a timely debate, taking place during the World Antibiotics Awareness Week. Any kind of awareness week has a number of important consequences. In this context, improving the understanding of the risks faced, which we have heard clearly from other hon. Members, is key, as is presenting an opportunity to take action in response to the challenges presented.

The challenge is very clear and came through in all the speeches. The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) made it clear how difficult it is to overemphasise the scale of the challenge and the risk we face. Some 700,000 deaths a year are attributable to infections from superbugs that are resistant to antibiotics, and that figure is predicted, as we have heard, to rise to almost 10 million in total by 2050.

There are huge challenges in the livestock and veterinary sector as well. I was interested to hear that academics from the University of Glasgow in my constituency are among those taking the lead. I will say a wee bit more about what the university is doing shortly.

As the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) has said, the issue also has a big impact on developing countries, where people require access to medicines and the challenge of resistance is huge, and it threatens the progress made in health and tackling poverty. Being aware of the huge risks and then using that as a motivation to action is one of the key opportunities presented by awareness week.

I will reflect briefly on the Scottish Government's actions. A large amount of health policy is devolved, but there are good examples and good practice on which we can reflect. In March the Scottish Government announced a £4.2 million research grant to investigate the prevention and control of healthcare-associated infections, as well as to research new ways of using existing antibiotics more effectively and efficiently. Some of that funding was provided to a consortium of researchers led, as I have said, by the University of Glasgow in my constituency, working with other Scottish universities to establish a new Scottish Healthcare Associated Infection Prevention Institute, which will conduct important research, bringing together a range of academics, researchers, practitioners and so on.

The Scottish Government have also established the Scottish antimicrobial resistance and healthcare-associated infections strategic framework for between 2016 and 2021. It has a number of aims to do with the containment of antimicrobial resistance; advancing scientific knowledge and innovation; improving efficiency, transparency and accountability; and improved workforce capability. That is important for all environments where healthcare is delivered, such as care homes, community pharmacies and primary care, and for everyone involved in the delivery of care.

There are a number of things we can all do at an individual level. There was a debate in March, I think on the broader issue of antimicrobial resistance, during which we were encouraged to become an antibiotic guardian. In fact, when the sitting was suspended for a Division in the House, many of us signed up online. The number of people signing up to that campaign continues to grow and this is another important opportunity to encourage others to do so. The Scottish Health Secretary, Shona Robison, has pledged to join the scheme and to encourage as many people as possible to do so in order to reach the target of 100,000 people becoming an antibiotic guardian.

This debate has shown that the Government have some challenges and opportunities. Are we ensuring that the right levels of investment are being channelled through the right Departments? The importance of joined-up government across Departments, including DEFRA, DFID and the NHS, has been made clear in this afternoon's speeches. Towards the end of his remarks, the hon. Member for Stafford touched on the issue of a joined-up global response. There is a sense in some quarters that Brexit might represent some sort of retreat from the world stage. Yet the Government's response to the O'Neill report in 2016 clearly stated that a global response, including "working closely with Europe", is required. How do they see that relationship with European institutions in the context of Brexit? How can we be sure that the bonfire of red tape and regulation that so many Brexiteers have dreamed of for so many years will not weaken those efforts? We have already heard about the possibility of chlorine-washed chicken and so on coming into the United Kingdom as a result of potential trade deals with the United States. How can we make sure that meat that comes in as a result of new trade deals is not absolutely overloaded with antibiotics and other treatments that could lead to increased antimicrobial resistance?

In conclusion, this is a significant challenge and awareness is important. Awareness weeks, debates such as this, and the antibiotic guardian scheme play a very important role in tackling some of the challenges. I was interested to hear about the Swab and Send initiative and am keen to sign up to it. I can think of several dusty corners, not just in this Chamber but elsewhere in the Palace of Westminster, where who knows what might be discovered. I think that is a challenge to us all.

We know that there are models out there that can work. The hon. Gentleman spoke about a number of them and some of the many positive actions taken to tackle malaria, as well as the challenges that remain in closing the final gap. The other day I attended an interesting meeting between DFID officials and the all-party parliamentary group on vaccinations for all. We looked at the impact of the near eradication of polio and the challenges that will present for other schemes in the future. Some of the infrastructures that have been built up to deliver that historic achievement of the eradication of polio can perhaps be adapted to meet other healthcare challenges. I am not by any means an expert, but perhaps this is one of those areas.

It is clear from this debate that we can all play our part, and it is also important that the Government lead by example. Once again, I congratulate the hon. Member for York Outer on securing this debate and I look forward to the Government's response.

2.22 pm

**Julie Cooper** (Burnley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) for securing this debate on a really important subject during the week when we are focusing attention on the value of antibiotics and the challenges of antimicrobial resistance.

We have heard some interesting contributions, and I think there is widespread agreement across the Chamber. To reiterate some of the problems, we all agree that antimicrobial resistance is arguably the biggest challenge facing our health system. It is worth taking a moment to reflect on how fantastic antibiotics have been. We take so much for granted. Alexander Fleming's discovery of penicillin heralded a golden age in health. Penicillin was the first of many antibiotics; it alone has saved countless lives and was rightly hailed as a wonder drug. Wide-scale access to antibiotics changed the nature of medicine forever: wounds would heal and operating theatres became safe places where life-changing and, indeed, life-saving operations could be carried out without fear of deadly infection.

However, that was a long time ago and we now too often take antibiotics for granted. We have become blasé about their use. We have become careless and irresponsible. Too often at the first hint of an infection—a cough, a sneeze or a headache—GPs come under pressure from their patients to prescribe antibiotics. Too often antibiotics are the first port of call. Too often they are made available as a precaution. Through overuse and inappropriate use we have allowed the development of resistant bacteria on a global scale.

That is not just confined to their use on humans, as has been mentioned by several hon. Members. In fact, the use of antibiotics in animal husbandry is widespread and is not just to treat infection, nor even to protect against infection. Until relatively recently it was permissible for sub-therapeutic doses to be added to animal feed to promote growth. That practice was banned globally in only January of this year. Even without that, 44% of all antibiotics used in the UK are used on animals and often inevitably find their way into the food chain and domestic water supplies. Cat McLaughlin, chief advisor to the National Farmers Union on animal health and welfare, stated:

“Arbitrary restrictions on the use of antibiotics...could have a detrimental impact on animal and plant health.”

That might be all well and good; however, the scientific consensus is that if we fail to place restrictions on the use of antibiotics, there will be a catastrophic effect on human health.

It is worth stressing that, as we have heard, antimicrobial resistance is the cause of 700,000 deaths globally each year, and that figure is predicted to rise significantly, to horrific levels, by 2050. Here in England, 5,000 people die every year from infections that have developed resistance to antibiotics. We must not underestimate the full impact of antimicrobial resistance. Let us be absolutely clear: without resort to effective antibiotics, there will be no treatment for complex infections, no chemotherapy for cancer and no treatment for cystic fibrosis, heart transplants or joint replacements. I recently visited the microbiology laboratory at the Royal Blackburn Hospital in Lancashire and the consultant microbiologist I spoke with said, “If you take one thing from your visit here today let it be this: we are so close to being unable to

perform even the most minor, the most simple, operations, and so close to being unable to treat commonplace infections.” She impressed on me the need for urgent action.

The World Health Organisation identified the need for co-ordinated global action back in 2011. I am pleased to say that the UK has been a leader in responding and that at the time it published the five-year antimicrobial strategy and commissioned the O'Neill report, which has already been mentioned. It is clear that our focus should be two-fold.

First and foremost, we must raise awareness of the danger of overuse and focus on the reduction of demand. There is a lot that we can and must do. I agree with other hon. Members that we must start with a public education programme to manage expectations and to highlight the issues of inappropriate use and too frequent use. We should increase the use of diagnostic testing so that only efficacious targeted antibiotics are used.

In both those areas we should look to community pharmacists to lead. Qualified pharmacists are well placed to provide antimicrobial stewardship. Every day 1.6 million visits are made to community pharmacies in the UK, which provides ample opportunity to advise the public on appropriate treatments for ailments, to ensure full awareness of remedies other than antibiotics that may in many cases be more appropriate. The Royal Pharmaceutical Society has offered to support its members to take on new and extended roles. Why not take it up on that offer? Why not make mandatory the roll-out of minor ailment schemes in community pharmacies? Why not support community pharmacists to carry out diagnostic testing to support GPs and other dispensing health professionals? Reducing the prescribing of antibiotics is not just the responsibility of GPs.

We must also regulate to reduce the amount of antibiotics used routinely on animals that are not sick. The National Office of Animal Health refutes the call for extended regulations and rejects the call to reduce antibiotic use in food products. However, we must act to promote a global reduction, because we are not talking about insignificant amounts of antibiotic use. Here in the UK, as I have mentioned, 44% of all antibiotic use is on animals. In the USA that figure is more than 70%. Many nations do not even record the figure and there is every reason to suppose that it is far higher. We must acknowledge that this is a global problem and play our part in identifying new incidences of antimicrobial resistance.

We must invest in research and development, promoting innovation to discover the next generation of antibiotics. At the moment, fewer than 100 scientists are working in the pharma industry to develop antibiotics, due mainly to a lack of adequate reimbursements. Not only would that ensure antibiotic protection for us in future, but investment in this sphere has the potential to make a significant contribution to the UK economy. We must see the challenges as opportunities.

The UK has an opportunity to be a world leader in life sciences and antibiotic development, but the reality is that, contrary to the O'Neill report's recommendations, there has been insufficient progress, and incentives to promote this innovative work are not forthcoming. We should stop focusing on the cost of new antibiotics and focus on the cost of not developing them. The British Society for Antimicrobial Chemotherapy maintains that the UK has failed to address the issues in three main

[Julie Cooper]

areas: education and public awareness; veterinary and agricultural use; and incentives for antibiotic discovery, research and development.

As we mark World Antibiotics Awareness Week, I ask the Minister to outline what steps the Government will take on three fronts. What steps will he take to reduce the inappropriate use of existing antibiotics in the treatment of human illness? What action will he take to regulate the use of antibiotics on healthy livestock? What action will he take to stimulate the research and development of new antibiotics? Will he demonstrate to us that the Department is determined to take this subject by the scruff of the neck? A world without antibiotics is unthinkable.

2.31 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine):** In a rare and welcome twist for a Westminster Hall debate, I think I will have time to cover pretty much all the points that colleagues have raised.

Let me congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) on successfully securing this debate in World Antibiotics Awareness Week. As everyone has said, it gives us a great opportunity to draw attention to an important issue—or the important issue. On the way in, I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), “I didn’t know you were interested in this subject,” and she said, “This is a critical issue.” It has come on to her radar, so she has come to speak—brilliantly, I thought—in today’s debate. Say to many Members across the House, “We have a debate on AMR this afternoon,” and they would ask what that is. I do not think that will be the case for much longer, nor should it be, and I thank everyone for their contributions. Raising awareness of the importance of preserving antibiotics through their appropriate use and preventing infections in both humans and animals is part of the challenge.

Lord O’Neill has been rightly lauded and much mentioned this afternoon for his review of AMR, which was published last year. I agree that it is an excellent and accessible piece of work. The former Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, and David Cameron deserve great credit for having the foresight to ask him to do it. His review said that, by 2050, an estimated 10 million deaths a year could be caused globally by AMR if no action is taken. In comparison, cancer causes 8.2 million deaths per year—I am also the cancer Minister for England—and diabetes causes 1.5 million, to put that in context.

AMR is part of the Darwinian process of natural selection, as microbes adapt following exposure to antimicrobials. The problem is greatly amplified by the inappropriate use of antimicrobials—in particular, antibiotics. All Members who have spoken today mentioned public education. It was one of the four points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy). While he spoke, I googled Swab and Send—I was listening at the same time; I can multitask, contrary to popular belief—which looks absolutely excellent. I look forward to finding out a bit more about Dr Adam Roberts’ project; he has done excellent work.

If any Members or constituents wish to find out more about the science of AMR, I heartily recommend the new “Superbugs” exhibition at the Science Museum

in London. It explains both what AMR is and how we are using science to tackle it. The exhibition is an excellent example of the cross-sectoral collaboration that has enabled the UK to take such a leading role in tackling AMR.

While I am on the subject of science museums, may I give a shameless plug to my constituency—this does not happen often for a Minister? Public awareness is critical and that was a key point in the O’Neill report. A few weeks ago, I went to the Winchester Science Centre, which has just launched a new partnership with the University of Southampton. It has a brilliant new exhibit on AMR called, “The most dangerous game in the world”, which gives children—it is mostly children who visit the centre—the chance to understand what AMR is. They play an interactive game to try to understand the threat it poses to us and what we are doing to tackle it. Through the Association for Science and Discovery Centres—there are science centres all around the country; some will be in the constituencies of Members here today—we have the chance to raise the profile of the public education role that is needed for AMR. I suggest that raising awareness among our young people would be a brilliant place to start.

This debate is timely as it follows the publication last week of the all-party group’s antibiotics report, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer. The report made recommendations for us and others to consider in our development of future action plans to combat AMR. I thank the group for the report. Its recommendations will be useful as we develop the refreshed UK AMR strategy and the new action plan; the current one comes to the end of its five-year life at the end of 2018. In addition, the UK strategy makes the commitment to assess the effectiveness of the implementation plan at the end of the five-year period. The policy innovation research unit at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine is undertaking a full evaluation of the current UK five-year strategy, looking at the evidence underpinning the key mechanisms of change across human and animal health sectors. Its work will further inform the development of the refreshed strategy.

It is World Antibiotics Awareness Week and European Antibiotics Awareness Day is on Saturday 18 November. The two events take a “one health” approach, with human and veterinary health professionals working closely to give a unified message on the subject. They provide opportunities to engage with healthcare professionals and the public on AMR and what we can all do to help to address it. As part of World Antibiotics Awareness Week, letters are sent from the chief professional officers for England and other national leaders inviting colleagues who are working in the NHS, local authorities, universities and professional organisations to support activities for the week. Links are provided to a wealth of AMR-related resources.

Our chief medical officer, the much mentioned—rightly so—Professor Dame Sally Davies, works closely with her opposite numbers in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast. She falls within my responsibility and I see her regularly. We always talk about this, and her book, “The Drugs Don’t Work”, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford, is a brilliant piece of work. I recommend it to anybody with an interest in the subject.

The national Keep Antibiotics Working campaign was launched across the country last month by Public Health England, for which I have ministerial responsibility, to raise awareness of AMR and, using TV, radio and social media advertising, to reduce demand for antibiotics by the public. I hope that Members have seen, heard and watched that campaign.

In addition, the antibiotic guardian scheme, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), was launched in 2014, providing brilliant tools for healthcare professionals to raise awareness. That has now signed up more than 50,000 individuals, of whom I am one—people pledge personally to commit themselves to use antibiotics more prudently. When I signed up I did not see in the drop-down options a dram of whisky, but why not? The people behind that website are probably listening or watching, so surely it is only a matter of time.

The debate is also timely in that the Government are due to publish shortly the third annual progress report on implementation of the UK five-year AMR strategy. The report will set out the range of activity that went on through 2016—we look at the year before—to implement the strategy and points to the reduction in antimicrobial use in 2015 throughout the UK. Data for England in 2016, published just last month, show a continuing reduction in antimicrobial use in humans. Significantly, the annual sales data for antimicrobial use in animals, published last month, show a 27% drop in the use of antibiotics in food-producing animals since 2014. That meets the Government commitment two years ahead of target.

At this point I want to touch on colistin, which my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer referred to. Sales of colistin decreased by 83%—below the maximum target recommended by the European Medicines Agency—during the lifetime of the plan so far. On whether a review is looking into colistin use, I am not aware of any specific review, but its use is highly restricted and controlled now; it has dropped by 83%, as I said, and we continue to monitor it extremely closely, I am sure he will be pleased to hear.

This is just the beginning; our work is by no means complete. Last month, Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture launched a set of sector-specific reduction targets that we aim to and will deliver by 2020. The Government have also set challenging ambitions to halve the number of healthcare-associated gram-negative bloodstream infections and the inappropriate use of antimicrobials in humans by 2020-21. Gram-negative infections are growing in incidence. Gram-negative bacteria are more resistant to antibiotics and are increasingly resistant to most available antibiotics.

E.coli infections, for example, make up the bulk of the healthcare-associated gram-negative bloodstream infections we aim to reduce. A report published by Public Health England last month revealed that four in 10 patients with an E. coli bloodstream infection in England cannot be treated with the antibiotic most commonly used in hospitals; that relates to a point made by the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper). In 2017-18 we aim for a 10% reduction in all E.coli infections. Just two days ago, on Tuesday, the Secretary of State hosted an event with over 200 frontline staff from primary and secondary care to share good examples of actions to tackle such infections—I am sure that colleagues from Lancashire were there—and to develop improvement plans for 2018.

The consumption of antibiotics is a major driver of the development of antibiotic resistance. We have implemented a range of initiatives to help prescribers to improve their use of antibiotics, including the provision of guidance and tool kits and the use of behavioural change initiatives and financial incentives. AMR local indicators are provided in the Public Health England Fingertips portal, bringing together local information on prescribing and infection rates to allow local teams to benchmark their performance against others in similar areas so they can develop strategies for improvement that are appropriate for their local circumstances.

That gives me a chance to touch on the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet, who mentioned sustainability and transformation partnerships. We absolutely expect AMR to be included, and it was included in the planning guidance for developing STPs. Take-up in local areas has been limited, but I suggest that MPs apply pressure to their local STPs by encouraging the STP leads to consider AMR. For the record, STPs that are in my good books—the apples of my eye—are Cheshire, Wider Devon and the Black Country. If Members wish, they can refer their STP leads to those as places to look for good practice that are involving AMR in their planning.

Most Members who have spoken have touched on new drugs; my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford certainly did so at great length. Although preventing infections and protecting the antibiotics that we have are the first two pillars of any approach to tackling AMR, the third is promoting the development of new drugs and alternative treatments. However, as has been said, no new treatments have been brought to market for many years. We fully support action to address this market failure through market incentives such as market entry rewards, championed by the O'Neill review, and other solutions, and we welcome the commitment made this year by G20 leaders to consider how such solutions could be implemented regionally and internationally. My hon. Friend's ideas are welcome, and he is dead right in calling for a co-ordinated approach and for us to give them a bit of a push, to use the expression that he used.

**Jeremy Lefroy:** My hon. Friend's commitment to the subject shines through; it is great to see his leadership. I gently suggest that although global work and co-operation are extremely important and will, in the end, produce the kind of results that we need, we could take a step ourselves as the United Kingdom. The amount of money required to start something like, for instance, the Medicines for Malaria Venture is not great, particularly if it comes from a combination involving Government. The UK has provided 20% of the funding, as I said, alongside the Gates foundation. Sometimes it takes quite a time to get the world to work together. Perhaps we could consider doing something ourselves with as many co-operators as we can, and getting it going right now. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) said, we could consider using the official development assistance budget, because this is for the benefit of everybody in the world, and it certainly is for poverty reduction.

**Steve Brine:** My hon. Friend is quite right. I have made a note and passed it back to the team. There are many pulls, of course, on the UK aid budget—that is a

[*Steve Brine*]

topical subject about which he knows far more than I do—but I will definitely take away that point and speak to our colleague, the new Secretary of State.

That point fits neatly into where I was going next. Although it will take time to develop an appropriate global model on the pull incentives, we are making significant progress on the push side. The UK has committed £50 million over the next five years to the global AMR innovation fund, which has been discussed in the House many times. The first tranche of £10 million will fund a bilateral UK-China AMR research collaboration, which we expect to open next spring.

At the same time, we are working with pharmaceutical companies through the joint Government-industry working group. A number of Members have said that this cannot all be left to the public sector, and it absolutely cannot. Through the working group, we are seeking to develop a NICE health technology assessment-based reimbursement model—another snappy title. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford said, that means that we would pay for antibiotics based on their value. A team at York University—I know that this will be of great interest to my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer—is working on the evaluation process and will report back to me in the spring. We will then decide on and announce the next steps. I hope that that is useful to Members.

To return to international issues, last week I attended the G7 in Milan—the presidency is held by Italy this year—to discuss international health matters. AMR was one of the three key items that we discussed, which shows the importance of taking a “one health” approach. It was a meeting with many challenging conversations as we attempted to produce a communiqué, which we did in the end, but I can report that the AMR discussion was not one of them. All attendees—the seven Governments, international bodies such as the World Health Organisation and other non-governmental organisations—were in complete alignment that AMR is an urgent global issue and the problems that it raises cannot be solved by individual countries. There was unanimity.

This was the third time that AMR had been prioritised on the G7 agenda, which shows our continued dedication to tackling it and the importance of countries working together. I had an interesting bilateral conversation with the Health Minister from Canada, which will assume the presidency next year in January. I urged her to keep the issue at the forefront of her mind; I hope that that went in. Each country needs to take action to tackle AMR, but we are obviously stronger together.

Our chief medical officer, to refer to Sally again, works tirelessly to raise the profile of AMR in the WHO and international circles. She travels far more than I, and ensures its place not just as a health and agricultural issue but as a political and financial one; a number of Members have mentioned the fiscal cost of AMR. The United Nations declaration secured in September last year made it clear that we will not be able to deliver the sustainable development goals if we do not tackle AMR. As a number of Members have been kind enough to mention, we have been at the forefront of shaping action on AMR through proactive engagement, and Dame Sally has an awfully big role to play in that.

Indeed, at the G7, the OECD recognised and acknowledged that the UK is leading the way in providing experience on how to tackle AMR. Although many challenges will come as a result of our decision to leave the European Union, in this area, as in so many others, we lead the world, and it is very much in the world’s interest to continue working closely with us and benefiting from our experience. The bottom line is: why wouldn’t they?

I will also mention the Japanese, who are passionate about tackling AMR and with whom I had conversations around the G7. I was pleased to learn that they are as dedicated as we are to addressing AMR. This week, our chief medical officer attended an AMR conference that they hosted in Tokyo with other Asian countries. I understand it went well and look forward to getting a formal readout when she returns.

Good global surveillance is essential to provide a co-ordinated global response, as underlined by last week’s G7 discussions. For that reason, we support low and middle-income countries through our £265 million Fleming fund to improve their surveillance capacity and capability. UK official development assistance will improve in-country laboratory capacity for AMR surveillance through a “one health” approach. It has already supported 31 countries worldwide to develop AMR national action plans that follow on closely from what we have done.

Many hon. Members have mentioned that a cross-Government approach is needed in Whitehall. That goes without saying. The officials advising me today are from the Department of Health and from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We work closely with officials and Ministers across Departments. AMR is a global problem that will not be addressed in the lifetime of any single strategy. Although the UK has led the way and made significant progress at home and overseas, this is a long-term, serious and urgent problem. I welcome initiatives such as World Antibiotics Awareness Week that enable us to continue to discuss the issue, give us a media hook to hang it on, keep it high on the agenda for professionals across all sectors and, vitally, keep it in the minds of members of the public.

2.51 pm

**Julian Sturdy:** I thank all hon. Members for their contributions and the Minister for his response. From speaking to him previously and from what he has said today, I know he understands the task ahead not only for us in the UK but globally. It is important to remember and to pay tribute to the work that has already been done, which was ably led by David Cameron and the O’Neill review—one of the most important reviews that was set out by the then Prime Minister.

We have a job to do in this House. I have attended packed Westminster Hall debates on issues such as cycling and bee health—I am not decrying those important issues; I do not want my inbox full of emails on that tonight—but if we are not getting hon. Members from all sides of the House in for a debate on something as important as antibiotic resistance that affects us all, all our constituents, our country and the globe, that is quite worrying. If all hon. Members take that away from this debate, that will be encouraging.

We are an immensely fortunate generation to have been born and to have grown up in the world of the antibiotic age. I look at this issue for the sake of future

generations. I have an interest in that because I have young children, and I think the Minister has children of a similar age. When the next generation hit their 30s and 40s and begin to start families of their own, there is a real possibility that their children will be born into a world without antibiotics—a post-antibiotic age. That is quite terrifying. It is essential that the required steps are taken for that next generation.

If we get that right, no medals will be handed out. No statues will be erected in the streets. If the Minister becomes the Minister with responsibility for antibiotic resistance and succeeds in his pledges, he will not be immortalised in a statue in the centre of London. The world will continue as it is, and many will not even know the threat that faced them. If we stand by and do nothing, however, history will be extremely unkind to our generation. It is essential that we act. The UK is making great steps forward, but there is so much more to do and it has to be done on a global stage.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered World Antibiotics Awareness Week.

2.54 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Support for Care Leavers

[MRS CHERYL GILLAN *in the Chair*]

3 pm

**Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Department for Work and Pensions' support for care leavers.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I am extremely glad to have the opportunity to debate this important subject in Parliament. I have been interested in the care system, and the young people who grow up in it and move out of it into adult life, for the past 10 years. When I first came to Westminster, my main interest was in education, but I quickly became aware of the large number of young people in our society—approximately 70,000 of them—who are in care because life at home has gone wrong. Without a stable foundation, so many opportunities are diminished and hindered.

The Minister will be pleased to hear that I believe that the most important work with young people in care, which is ultimately for the benefit of care leavers, is done in other Departments. Perhaps some of the most significant spends that are required are on matters that she can address with her colleagues and that fall within their budgets, such as early intervention for parents or children suffering from poor mental health or addiction problems. I am sure she has such conversations with her colleagues in the Department for Education, the Department of Health and the Department for Communities and Local Government.

Too often, we give the impression that the care system in our country is irretrievably broken. I do not believe it is. Some 60% of care leavers do not become NEET—not in education, employment or training—on leaving school, which is a sign that the care system has worked for them and has provided them with opportunities they might not have received if they had stayed at home. However, that is not to say that the system cannot be improved; it can be, and I believe it has been over the past 10 years. The Munro review of child protection and Martin Narey's reviews of residential care and fostering for the DFE have contributed to the quality of care that young people in our country receive.

Obviously, the care system is extraordinarily varied. It is often said that England has not one care system, but 150—one for each of the local authorities that take in children. Those systems and the legal framework in which they operate remind us that young people in care are our children. Because the state has decided to take them away from their families and try to create a new family environment for them, the responsibility for their wellbeing, opportunities and success lies strongly with central and local government. We should always remember that when we consider the policy interventions we can make to improve their lives.

With that in mind, what can the Department for Work and Pensions do to help young people as they embark on adult life and look for the opportunities that everyone wants, such as a stable family, a job, a chance to prosper and decent accommodation? On work and training, one wonderful initiative in the past few years

[Alex Burghart]

has been a bursary of about £2,000 for young care leavers to go to university. I know from having spoken to care leavers that it has created opportunity where there was none before. Young people also get help with accommodation and on-site help at their universities.

That is a great start, but relatively few care leavers go to university; the majority go straight into the world of work. Modern apprenticeships, which provide a new route into employment for our young people, have been a very successful Government initiative that is growing year on year, but they do not offer care leavers the same advantages as young people living at home with their families. Indeed, the system rather assumes that apprentices have a family home to live in. Having talked to care leavers who have to manage their household bills and finances on the very low initial income that new apprentices receive—about £3.50 an hour—I ask the Government to look again at the issue.

I know that the apprenticeships programme falls within the DFE's purview, but it is also in the DWP's interest to ensure that young people do not become unemployed. We know that young people who become long-term unemployed when they leave school are much more likely to be long-term unemployed later in life, so it is crucial for the system to help them to avoid that pitfall. I suggest to the Minister that a little upstream investment could save a lot of money in subsequent benefit payments. A few years ago, the DWP part-funded ThinkForward, a very interesting initiative to identify young people at risk of becoming NEET and support them with long-term mentoring in the years before they left school. It dramatically reduced the number of NEETs in the target group. The DWP has a good track record with this work, and I encourage it to do more.

Many care leavers start adult life on welfare, receiving help with their bills and the necessary support to have somewhere to live. It is important that we ensure that our welfare system is adapted to their needs, especially with respect to up-front accommodation costs. As hon. Members know, the shared accommodation rate gives young people in the benefits system money for a room rather than a flat, under the assumption that they live with others, but care leavers are subject to an exemption until the age of 22. That exemption is a good Government policy, but charities I have spoken to—including the Children's Society, which gave me some very good advice before the debate—point out that it would be better to extend it to the age of 25, when a different benefit payment rate kicks in. I strongly encourage the Minister to consider such an extension, which would ensure that care leavers have no hiatus in pay to overcome. The Children's Society estimates that it would cost about £5 million—a small cost that would be far outweighed by the good it would do.

When I was director of strategy at the Office of the Children's Commissioner, I spent a lot of my time going around the country to talk to local authorities that had excellent care-leaving units. Some areas, particularly Trafford, had a very detailed local strategy to ensure that the personal advisers who helped care leavers worked with their colleagues in the local jobcentre. That is important for various reasons. First, a decent personal adviser will be there to give advice on how the complexities of all the new systems work. However, it should also be

a two-way conversation. If a young person has left care and falls into trouble—and is perhaps trying to get their head around meeting appointments or making sure that they do the right things to be able to claim their benefits—their personal adviser will be there to walk them through the system. We have a good generation of new work coaches who are extremely helpful when someone gets into the jobcentre, but it is important for some care leavers to have advice outside of the jobcentre to make sure that they can follow the system without falling into difficulties and becoming sanctioned. They need to know what they are entitled to.

I know there is good practice going on in the country, but I also know it is not standardised. I welcome any attempt by DWP and DFE to bring together directors of children's services and regional heads of jobcentres so that conversations can be held at a high managerial level and cascaded down to other parts of the country.

The Centre for Social Justice, for which I used to work, contacted me before this debate about a little glitch in the welfare system for care leavers taking apprenticeships. They have to wait a month for their first payment, and the CSJ suggested that those care leavers be enabled to retain their benefits for that month. Again, that bridges a gap so as to prevent young people from falling into debt when they have made the correct decision to get an apprenticeship, build their skills and move into work. Similarly, we should allow care leavers to retain housing benefit at the existing level when they move into an apprenticeship, again reducing the risk of their acquiring arrears and getting into debt.

As I wrap up, I want us to think about data. DWP, DFE and the Ministry of Justice have come on in leaps and bounds in recent years, plugging their different enormous datasets together. That means it is increasingly possible to see how children from certain backgrounds and with certain experiences go on to achieve certain outcomes. The value of that is obviously enormous. This country has very good national datasets, which means we will be able to identify which young people become long-term unemployed and what their experiences have been at school, in the care system and in childhood before that. Similarly, it will enable us to identify the young people who had poor experiences and who then went on to be successful. If we do that, we can dig down into what made the crucial difference for those people: what children's services department, what charity, and what intervention helped change their lives. Then we can seek to extend that good practice to other areas, truly creating a wonderful learning environment.

Finally, I encourage the Minister to let her data analysts roam free over the extraordinary wealth of knowledge that is sitting in Government Departments.

3.13 pm

**Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) on securing this important debate. As I listened to him, I was pleased to note that he and I have quite a common view on many of the issues. He was very clear in his opening remarks; there is a danger that we might forget that when we use the term "care leavers" we are talking about young people who have already encountered more than their fair share of troubles. They have not usually enjoyed the benefits of a stable

family life that are available to others. They may have had little or no contact with their natural parents and family members, or those relationships may have been abusive and traumatising, so we are talking about people who have not had the best of starts. They are significantly more likely to be classed as NEETs—not in education, employment or training—if we compare them with their non-care counterparts, which is an important point to bear in mind, and of course they are much more likely to be subject to benefit sanctions. I suspect that is because sufficient account is not taken of the other things happening in their lives in the way in which the benefits system sometimes processes those transactions.

Our starting point should be to say that these young people are full of potential, but they need something extra by way of support and encouragement from the welfare state, which needs to pick up some of the corporate parenting role every bit as much as the local authority to ensure that those young folk get the assistance necessary to achieve their full potential.

The Government, to their credit, have sought to identify their corporate parenting responsibilities. In 2016 they published “Keep on caring”, a cross-departmental strategy paper designed to provide better support to care leavers. It identified five key outcomes, two of which are particularly relevant to this debate. One was improved access to education, employment and training: encouraging supported internships, meeting training costs and providing employment opportunities for care leavers in Government Departments and their agencies. Another was to ensure that care leavers achieve financial stability. That involved a promise to exempt care leavers from cuts in housing support due to be applied to all other 18 to 21-year-olds. The strategy also promised a review of the case for extending the exemption to shared accommodation rates within universal credit up to the age of 25, which is something that the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar asked the Minister to pursue. It also promised a further review of the personal adviser role to ensure that care leavers can get support to help them manage their finances.

As I have said, the Government deserve credit for the approach that “Keep on caring” set out. I do not doubt the sincerity of Ministers on these issues, but there are doubts about implementation, especially against the backdrop of cash-strapped local authorities, worries over the roll-out of universal credit, and large funding cuts to other services. I am advised that care leavers not in education or training do not have access to a personal advisor until the age of 25, but I believe there is provision within the universal credit arrangements for work coaches to suspend work requirements during periods of particular hardship or difficulty, for example, if someone is homeless. Are such measures available to care leavers who find themselves in similar difficult, confused circumstances? If not, will the Minister consider adopting that approach?

Does the Minister have any information on how many care leavers are claiming universal credit and how many of them are currently in rent arrears? As I understand it, there is a DWP marker for care leavers, but only if they self-identify as a care leaver, and I am not clear that that arrangement will necessarily continue under universal credit. I should say that I do not think that what I am talking about is part of some grand conspiracy. I am merely asking whether it has been thought about; are things joined up? I say that because I recognise that

“Keep on Caring” was a cross-departmental document, and I am kind of keen to know what work is going on to reduce the bureaucracy that care leavers experience as they try to negotiate local authorities and jobcentres in pursuit of such things as housing, housing benefit, training, job opportunities and other financial support. I recently visited a London jobcentre to look at the roll-out of universal credit, and I was impressed by the work coaches I met, but I was particularly interested to know whether there is any specific training for them on the issue of corporate parenting principles: how are we going to take that bit of “Keep on Caring” and translate it into the work that is done on the ground? It would be helpful to know that.

As the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar was saying, on the issue of apprenticeships, £3.50 per hour may be fairly meagre, but I suppose it is conceived on the basis that an 18-year-old living at home with one or both parents could get by on that sort of money. My question is how it incentivises a young care leaver to take up an apprenticeship, and, if we are being honest, how on earth we expect them to manage on that kind of money. I know that the Minister will not be able to help me too much, because as far as I understand it the Government freely admit that they have no idea how many care leavers start or complete apprenticeships; nor do they know how many employers receive the additional apprenticeship payment for taking on a care leaver. The hon. Gentleman concluded his remarks by discussing how much use we could make of data. If only the Government collected some of it. I was surprised when I tabled parliamentary questions to discover that that information was not collected. I should have thought it was a good opportunity for the Government to measure the progress they were trying to make.

I certainly endorse the suggestion of an apprenticeship bursary—I presume that that is what the hon. Gentleman was suggesting—to mirror the higher education bursary; it would be a good idea. From the figures that I have seen it does not look in any sense cost-prohibitive. If it is part of the aim of “Keep on Caring”—something that the Department for Work and Pensions can play a major role in delivering—to make it possible to get a job and a stable life, it seems that we should strive to provide good-quality apprenticeships.

I note that the 2016 care leavers strategy states that the DWP is willing to explore what more can be done in the benefits system to support those wishing to return to education between the ages of 21 and 25. Is the Minister in a position to update us on any progress being made in that area? A lot might be learned from organisations such as Become, whose Propel project supports care leavers into further and higher education.

Finally, as the chair of the all-party group on looked after children and care leavers, I am in the privileged position of getting to hear the views and experiences of quite a lot of young people who have been part of the care system. I note that there is a promise, in the corporate parenting consultation by the Department for Education, to incorporate young peoples’ understanding of corporate parenting responsibilities into the work that it is doing on the local offer. It would be a good idea if the DWP could say it was going to adopt the same approach. Perhaps I may conclude by inviting the Minister to attend a future meeting of the group, where she could listen first-hand to what some young care leavers say. It would make a real difference to them.

**Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair):** I have had a request to accommodate a colleague, and will therefore call Patricia Gibson and then Will Quince.

3.25 pm

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Thank you, Mrs Gillan; I appreciate your calling me at this time. To clarify things for colleagues, I have made a request to leave a little early. I am thankful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate, as I would have been sad to miss it. I thank the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) for securing it, as the young people in question need as much support as we can provide for them.

Young people leaving care are in the unique position of having the state as their corporate parent, and their educational, health and employment outcomes, sadly, are significantly poorer than those of their peers. The support to which they have access should be monitored and reviewed periodically; it should be shaped by the lived experience of care leavers, to ensure that it is effective and responsive to their particular needs.

The facts in relation to DWP support for care leavers make uncomfortable reading. A disproportionate number of care leavers have support removed, or live with punitive sanctions that are imposed on them by the welfare system. Care leavers have reported problems such as having financial support removed. That affects them acutely—perhaps more acutely than it affects those in many other sections of the population—because often they do not have family support, or even social support, when financial support is withdrawn.

According to recent information uncovered by the Children's Society, in England between 2013 and 2015 nearly 4,000 sanctions were applied to care leavers, representing one sanction for every 13 of them. Indeed, care leavers in England are three times more likely to have had a benefit sanction than members of the general working-age population, where the rate is one sanction for every 39 people. As has already been pointed out, we can be pretty sure that the true number of care leavers facing a sanction is likely to be far higher than the figures suggest.

The DWP currently collects information on self-reported care leavers, which means that if a care leaver does not identify their status, they are not included in the figures. Such practice has encouraged the First Minister of Scotland to announce a root-and-branch review of the care system in Scotland, which will be driven by the experience of those in care, taking into account the views of 1,000 young people who have experienced care.

Outcomes for care leavers trail quite badly behind those for their peers, so doing more to help them to achieve positive destinations will have a significant impact on their future, despite the many and varied challenges that they may have faced in the past. The past cannot be changed, but we can change what their future may look like.

The care experienced employability programme is a one-year pilot project in Scotland to help 270 young care leavers between the ages of 16 and 29 to move into appropriate work, training or educational opportunities. It will be led by the third sector Young People's Consortium, which consists of Barnardo's Scotland, Action for Children

and the Prince's Trust. It will enhance and add value to existing youth employment provision for those young people who are often excluded from attaining their full potential through education and employment. By supporting more young care leavers to access employment, training and educational opportunities, and by working to close the attainment gap with their peers, we can send a clear signal that improvement in supporting that group of young people is necessary.

I hope that the Minister will set out some clear actions to tackle the fact that in England 40% of care leavers are not in education, training or employment, compared with 14% of their peers. That is a very poor comparison. In Scotland 78% of care leavers reach positive destinations within three months of leaving secondary education, but that is still not good enough, given that the figure for their peers is 93%.

I also hope that the Minister will indicate how the Government will address the fact that their own figures show that nearly one in five care leavers between the ages of 19 and 21 were either in accommodation that is considered unsuitable or in accommodation whose suitability was not known.

The reoffending rates of care leavers in England are now four times higher than those of all other young people. A recent study by Her Majesty's inspectorate of prisons found that 27% of young people in the young offenders institutions it surveyed had previously been in care, but the figure for female young offenders was 45%. This situation represents a huge swathe of wasted opportunities and potential, but it is hoped that the Children and Social Work Act 2017, which came into force in April, will help to turn around the tragedies that lie behind those figures.

I ask the Minister to look carefully at some of the Children's Society recommendations to help our care leavers to reach their true potential. The introduction of an apprenticeship bursary, which has been mentioned and which would support care leavers during the first year of their apprenticeship, would provide better financial support and ensure better long-term employment prospects for care leavers. The early warning system for care leavers at risk of sanction must be explored further by the DWP, to see whether it reduces the level of sanctioning. DWP staff should also ensure that universal credit is tailored to meet the particular circumstances of care leavers. Communication between Jobcentre Plus staff and care leavers should be more flexible. For example, if it is appropriate and will simplify communication, texting should be used.

A whole raft of measures have been proposed. Some of them would not cost very much at all, but they could have a significant and lasting impact on the lives and long-term prospects of care leavers. I ask the Minister to ensure that all of those measures are fully and carefully considered and explored by the Government, so that we can ensure that fewer of our care leavers fall through the cracks when they are young and consequently never catch up and reach their full potential. If they do not reach their full potential, that is bad not only for care leavers but for our society.

The DWP should always seek to make its support for care leavers more creative and innovative, and more responsive to the lived experience of our young care leavers, who are too important to be left behind.

3.32 pm

**Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): Thank you, Mrs Gillan, for calling me to speak; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) on securing this important debate.

This debate is ultimately about improving life chances, and the stats on care leavers are concerning. They are five times more likely to have been excluded from school and five times more likely to be convicted of a criminal offence or subject to a final warning or reprimand, and, as my hon. Friend mentioned earlier, only about 6% of care leavers end up going to university. However, the most troubling statistic for me is that care leavers are at considerably higher risk of homelessness, which is an issue that I care passionately about and that is the perspective from which I want to contribute to the debate.

I serve as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness, alongside the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle). In July we produced a report that examined homelessness among three specific cohorts: victims of domestic violence, prison leavers and care leavers. Everyone in this Chamber would agree that care leavers, given that often they will have grown up in challenging circumstances, should have all aspects of their wellbeing taken care of, and yet their housing needs are sometimes overlooked, as my hon. Friend mentioned earlier. When our APPG held its inquiry, we were told that a third of care leavers become homeless in the first two years after leaving care.

**Norman Lamb** (North Norfolk) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and I apologise for not being here earlier; I was at a suicide prevention conference in Belfast. I very much share his concerns. In Norfolk, when children being cared for by foster carers reach the age of 18, in many cases the carers' payments go down significantly. Does he agree that we need to avoid creating perverse incentives that might end up with children having to leave home and therefore being at risk of homelessness?

**Will Quince:** Broadly, I agree with the right hon. Gentleman, and I am pleased that the Minister has heard that point. I hope she will take it on board.

We also found that 25% of homeless people have been in care at some point in their lives. The Government's care leavers' charter states:

"We promise... To find you a home".

We have to make sure that the benefits system supports that aim.

The APPG's report recommends that care leavers should be exempt from the shared accommodation rate up to the age of 25. To provide some background, in 2012 the Government extended the shared accommodation rate to everyone under 35. The rate is the maximum amount that an individual can claim in housing benefit for a private rented property, and it is based on the cost of a room in a shared property rather than the cost of self-contained accommodation.

The rationale for that change, which incidentally I agree with, was to

"ensure that Housing Benefit rules reflect the housing expectations of people of a similar age",

meaning a similar cohort who are not on benefits. Yet it is often the case that care leavers have had a really challenging upbringing; they might have suffered traumas that other people of their age might never experience.

We already recognise that we should have different expectations of care leavers compared with those we have of their peers. We currently exempt care leavers from the shared accommodation rate up to the age of 22. Nevertheless, most young people have the option of staying at home if they are unable to move out, but that choice is not available to care leavers. Furthermore, in our evidence sessions we heard from care leavers who said that they would feel unsafe in a shared home.

Exempting care leavers from the shared accommodation rate up to the age of 25 would give them the space and security of their own home, which would make a tremendous difference to their transition into adulthood. That suggestion has actually been recognised by the Government. The 2016 "Keep on Caring" strategy stated that the Government would be

"reviewing the case to extend the exemption to the Shared Accommodation Rate...for care leavers to age 25".

Obviously, such an extension would have a financial cost, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar pointed out earlier. Currently, we do not know the number of care leavers who are affected by the move to the shared accommodation rate. I found that out—or, rather, tried to find it out and failed—when I submitted a written parliamentary question. However, the Children's Society estimates that the potential case load is about 3,300. With an average difference between the shared accommodation rate and the one-bedroom rate of about £1,600, the cost of exempting care leavers would be about £5.3 million. Given the potential difference that change could make to the lives of care leavers, that is not an unreasonable figure.

The state has a responsibility for care leavers, young adults who are often among the most vulnerable in our society. We need to ensure that their housing needs are looked after just as well as their other needs. By exempting them from the shared accommodation rate, we can give them safe and secure accommodation, and help them in that all-important transition to adulthood.

I know that the Minister is as passionate as I am about improving the life chances of care leavers and ensuring that we address and minimise the risk of homelessness. I hope that the Government will take that recommendation on board and look at it. I will send the Minister a copy of the APPG's very good report and hope that the Government will also look at its other recommendations.

**Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair):** We move to the winding-up speeches. I call Mr Alex Cunningham.

3.38 pm

**Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mrs Gillan.

First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) on securing this debate. I am pleased that we are united in recognising that we can all do more to give care leavers the best possible start to their adult lives. If the hon. Gentleman never says anything important again in this House, he said something

[Alex Cunningham]

important today: “Young people in care are our children”. That is a very important statement. I find it quite difficult to find much to disagree with in his speech, although the Government’s success is perhaps not quite as rosy as he thinks. In fact, his speech offered real challenges to the Government and I will go on to offer some of my own.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green—

**Steve McCabe:** Selly Oak.

**Alex Cunningham:** It says “Hall Green” here. I looked it up specially. I am sure that my hon. Friend is correct and I am wrong. He has spent a lot of his time championing looked-after children in this place, and I congratulate him on and thank him for that. He mentioned that these young people are full of potential. All young people are full of potential; we just need to give them the extra support they need to achieve that.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) talked about services being developed with the knowledge of the young people involved. I agree with that, and it is something we tried to do when I was a councillor in Stockton. She went on to give shocking statistics on the number of former care leavers in the criminal justice system. That is all the more reason for us to do much better.

I thank the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) for his work with the all-party parliamentary group for ending homelessness. The study it did focused on care leavers. I have spent a lot of my life trying to get people to focus more on care leavers, and it is great that we see that happening across the piece. He talked about the importance of them having the security of their own home, and I agree with that.

This subject is close to my heart. Although it is not my particular brief, I am pleased to be here today. I was the lead member for children’s services in Stockton. I very much enjoyed the time I spent with care leavers, even if I was left wondering how as a corporate parent I could do more for the likes of them, bearing in mind that they would be cast out into the wider world much younger than my own two sons, John and Andrew, who opted to leave home in their mid-20s. John and Andrew returned home, and I am always pleased to see them, but that is not an option for care leavers.

The situation that stuck out the most for me in recent years was not a young person from Stockton—it was when I met a young woman during a visit by the then Education Select Committee to deepest Kent. She was a care leaver and told of being all but abandoned in her room at a hostel and having to regularly put up with men braying at her door asking her to party with them. She was frightened. She felt at a loss as to what to do next, and she lacked the necessary support to get on with her life. As MPs, we are not formally corporate parents, but that does not mean we cannot recognise that, even though care leavers at 18 may be legally adults, there are many ways in which they need much more support than an average 18-year-old, who most likely has the support of a family. We can play our part in giving them that. We can start with the opportunity to move into high-quality training and employment

opportunities—something we want for our own children and grandchildren. The rates of young people not in education, employment or training are too high, with care leavers almost three times less likely to be in education, employment or training at the age of 19. That figure can no doubt be associated with an often unstable journey through the care system. Other Members have described that.

Progress has been made over the past 20 years, and that is worth reflecting on. The Labour Government took the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 through Parliament, which created the role of the personal adviser. While it is fair to say that the provision is not perfect—local authorities still struggle to maintain this level of service with shrinking budgets—in its day it was a real innovation. In 2009, the Labour Government introduced a requirement for all care leavers at university to receive a £2,000 bursary from their local authority.

It is not just Labour that has improved provision. In 2014, the coalition Government created the role of the virtual school head, whose job it is to promote the educational achievement of looked-after children in each area. I welcomed that. It was something we had been doing in Stockton. I welcomed the decision by the last Government to extend the provision of local authority support from 21 to 25 through the Children and Social Work Act 2017.

My own borough council, Stockton, has an excellent reputation for delivering for vulnerable people. It has removed the requirement for care leavers to pay council tax for a period of time while they are adjusting to their new independent life. Others have followed suit, and I wonder whether the Minister could encourage more to do likewise.

We all owe a debt of gratitude to the Children’s Society. Members have spoken about it and other organisations, such as Barnardo’s, and thanked them for their work with care leavers and the briefings and statistics they provide us all with. Statistics have been in evidence in the debate. We know that 40% of care leavers aged 19 to 21 are not in education, employment or training, compared with 14% of all other 19 to 21-year-olds. Outcomes under the Work programme for care leavers were significantly worse than for others. They were around half as likely to spend the minimum amount of time doing work experience within a 12-month period than peers aged 18 to 24 claiming jobseeker’s allowance.

The Department for Work and Pensions could do a lot more to improve the way the social security system works for care leavers. That cohort is five times more likely to face benefit sanctions than their peer group. The system of personal advisers introduced by Labour was a positive step, but the Children’s Society has highlighted that there is often a lack of co-ordination between personal advisers and work coaches. It has called for early warnings to be used when considering a sanction for a care leaver and for no sanction to be imposed without the personal adviser being notified. Will the Government look at that, and innovative schemes such as the one in Trafford, where there is a protocol between the DWP and the local council that allows for two-way communication between a care leaver’s personal adviser and work coach on their claim?

The Children’s Society also argues that sanctions should be at a lower rate, as for 16 and 17-year-olds, and be for no more than four weeks. What is the Minister’s

view on that? Another idea is that the DWP could send reminders of jobcentre appointments to young people by text or WhatsApp. The NHS does that already because of the cost of missed appointments. Care leavers do not have parents to prompt them to attend, so that might be something they could benefit from in particular.

For many who have recently left care, and those about to do so, their first experience of applying for benefits will be with universal credit. If the Government do not do something to help, they could face the same severe negative impact that universal credit is having on people and their wellbeing. In August 2017, the Children's Society report on care leavers and the benefits system highlighted that the DWP introduced a marker to identify care leavers on the labour market system used by DWP staff to ensure that they received more tailored support. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) spoke about that. There does not appear to be any such marker for universal credit, so will the Minister tell us what plans there are to change that?

Universal credit has also had implications for 18 to 21-year-old care leavers who are subject to the youth obligation, which effectively means increased conditionality compared with legacy benefits. They receive intensive work-focused support from the start of their claim. That may be positive, as it is not a good thing for young people to start their adult life with a prolonged period of unemployment. However, care leavers may face more challenges at that stage in their lives than the vast majority of their peers, so will the Government look at how they can pause that intensive search for work if the young person needs more time to attend to the other issues in their lives?

Under universal credit, the leaving care team cannot begin to set up the claim until the young person has turned 18, so payment will not be received for at least five to six weeks. This afternoon in the main Chamber we have been talking about universal credit, and Conservative Members themselves were saying that the period needed to be much shorter. The Minister could help to support local authority leaving care teams carrying out the administrative work to set up a claim four to six weeks before the young person leaves care, so that they will receive payment without delay. Will the DWP also provide more training for jobcentre staff to support care leavers, and work with local authorities to provide training for personal advisers so that they can understand universal credit better and make care leavers in their charge aware that alternative arrangements are possible?

In its briefing, the Children's Society also highlighted that care leavers might lose up to £45 from housing benefit when they turn 22 as a result of the existing rules on the shared accommodation rate of local housing allowance. Other Members covered that in detail. Finding affordable housing is already a severe problem for young people, so it is important that the impediments are addressed. A Centrepont survey found that 26% of care leavers have sofa-surfed and 14% have slept rough. Stability in housing has to be one of the most fundamental needs in ensuring stability in people's lives.

The cross-departmental leaving care strategy stated that the Government would look into extending the age at which young people switch from the single bedroom rate of local housing allowance to the shared

accommodation rate when living in private rented accommodation, which is a reality for many, given the shortage of social rented properties. Local housing allowance rates have been frozen until 2020, so a delay to the age at which care leavers begin to receive the shared accommodation rate—which can be £30 less per week—is particularly urgent. That move to a lower rate of support does not occur in a vacuum. It happens at a time when young people are only entitled to a lower rate national living wage, and at an age when their entitlement under universal credit is noticeably lower. That cut in monthly housing support eats into already stretched budgets, putting tenancies at risk and causing stress and anxiety.

Can the Minister share with us her assessment of the case for delaying the cut in the move to the shared accommodation rate from 22 to 25? I also ask her how the DWP could ensure that care leavers get the meaningful financial education they need. Many of us want it to be universal for all young people, but I would suggest that care leavers could do with a bit of extra help to ensure that they do not get into debt. If they do get into debt, they need even more robust support. I would be interested in her view on the breathing space being proposed in the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill for care leavers. That would halt creditors imposing interest charges and extra fees, which only worsen the debt.

I hope, and am sure, that the Government will listen to all the points made today, and act to show that we are all on the side of care leavers and want them to realise their full potential. I just hope that the Minister, like every individual who has spoken this afternoon, will become that real champion for care leavers.

3.51 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Caroline Dinenage):** It is a pleasure, as ever, to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) and congratulate him on securing this important debate on the support given by the Department for Work and Pensions to care leavers. I also thank hon. Members across the House for their valuable input to this important discussion. They have raised a number of really important issues on how the Government and, indeed, my Department support care leavers. I am very pleased to have the opportunity to address all—or at least most of—the questions that have been raised, and to set out some of the actions that we are taking.

Let me start by reassuring my hon. Friend, and indeed all Members, that the Government are committed to improving the lives of, and outcomes for, care leavers. We recognise that care leavers are among the most vulnerable groups of young people. We of course understand that sadly many were taken into care because of neglect or abuse as children. We understand that as they leave care, they often have to make the transition to adulthood and independent living at a younger age than their peers, and usually without the support of a family network, as other Members have said.

The exceptionally difficult challenges that care leavers face mean that their educational, health and employment outcomes can be significantly worse than those of their peers. That is why we introduced the first ever cross-government care-leaver strategy in 2013, and updated

[*Caroline Dinenage*]

that strategy in 2016. The strategy sets out the steps that the Government are taking—from housing to health services; from the justice system to educational institutions; and from financial support to work—to support care leavers to live happy, healthy and independent lives. The Department for Work and Pensions was proud to play a full and active role in supporting the Department for Education in developing that strategy. In the time available today, Members will forgive me if I focus as specifically as I can on the actions that the Department for Work and Pensions has taken, but it is important to remember, of course, that they are part of a cross-Government approach, which needs to be joined up as far as possible.

My Department has put in place a comprehensive package of support and protections for care leavers who need to claim benefits to make the transition from local authority care to independent living. That support ensures that they are offered the help that they need to take that important step, including the necessary assistance to find employment. That is where universal credit is an enormous benefit. The new work coach model means that each claimant stays with the same work coach throughout their claim, giving continuity of support for claimants. It also means that work coaches are able to identify very early a claim by someone who has complex needs—someone who may require individualised, tailored support. That, of course, includes care leavers.

A couple of hon. Friends and hon. Members mentioned that very important data collection exercise. My Department is working very hard to try to collect better data on claimants with complex needs, including care leavers. Information that someone is a care leaver is held on the claimant profile as part of the universal credit system. We are at the very early stages of the process, and we are still working through what data is being collected and what the data is telling us. We will, of course, keep a very close eye on that, and see if further markers are needed. That is why we have built into the universal credit system a pause-and-learn approach, which means that we can incorporate the benefits of our learning as we go. The Department for Education continues to publish valuable care leaver outcome data for 17 to 21-year-old care leavers. A data-share agreement is in place between Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, Department for Work and Pensions, and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to explore the link between educational achievement and labour-market outcomes. They will also explore the quality of outcome information that the data-sharing provides for specific groups, such as care leavers.

In universal credit, work coaches can tailor interventions to the needs of the individual, and the support that they can offer is incredibly wide-ranging. It can address a variety of barriers to work, and might include improving job-search skills, referral to skills and other work-related training, and other types of support. The work-related training can include traineeships, apprenticeship places, and work experience. I will speak a little more about apprenticeship places later on.

Jobcentre Plus districts work closely with their local authority care leaving teams to put in place protocols and processes to support care leavers who need to claim benefits. There are some great examples across the country of effective working protocols between job

centres and local leaving care teams. Barnet care leaver hub, for example, involves a Jobcentre Plus work coach, co-located in the local authority leaving care premises with the Drive Forward foundation, the care leaver charity that delivers intensive one-to-one work support. Jobcentre Plus partnership managers are working with their local authority leaving care teams to facilitate contracts and joint working protocols. We are working with the Department for Education to encourage local authority leaving care teams to contact Jobcentre Plus.

A key element of that is the facility to prepare a claim in advance of the claimant's 18th birthday. With the support of their local authority leaving care adviser or a Jobcentre Plus work coach, a care leaver can begin preparing to make that benefit claim four weeks before their 18th birthday. That ensures that all the identification and evidence checks are completed before they leave care and prevents any unnecessary delays in benefit payments. It also provides the opportunity to arrange advances and to direct rent payments to landlords where appropriate.

**Alex Cunningham:** The Minister is describing lots of good practice, but I wonder how we can get to the stage where a young person can be asked at their first point of contact with the DWP whether they are a care leaver, so that identification can follow them through the system?

**Caroline Dinenage:** That is something that we have discussed at length, and we are looking in detail to see whether that proposal could be incorporated. I would like to reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar and other hon. Members across the House that we have worked hard, and are continuing to work hard, to ensure that universal credit works and is beneficial, not only for the majority of straightforward cases but for care leavers and those with complex needs too. That is why we have introduced a series of measures aimed at safeguarding and supporting care leavers.

I would like to go through a few examples, which people may or may not be aware of. We have exempted care leavers from waiting days in universal credit. Those who are under the age of 22 do not serve the seven waiting days and are entitled to universal credit from the very first day that they make their claim.

We have introduced the second chance learning initiative to enable care leavers up to the age of 22 to catch up on the education they may have missed out on when they were younger. That means income support or universal credit are available to care leavers who take up full-time study in non-advanced education. We have exempted care leavers from the removal of automatic housing support for 18 to 21-year-olds in universal credit.

The hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) talked about exempting care leavers from council tax. The Government have given councils the flexibility to support vulnerable groups, including care leavers, to manage their council tax bills. The Department for Communities and Local Government wrote to all councils in 2016 to remind them of the powers they have under the Local Government Finance Act 1992 to support vulnerable groups. A number of councils have already taken the decision to support care leavers through an exemption or discount in their council tax bills, as I think he said his local council was doing.

**Steve McCabe:** I do not get that many opportunities to praise Birmingham City Council, but it is one of the authorities that apply the exemption. Will the Minister consider writing to her colleagues at DCLG to ask them to publish a full list of the councils that exempt care leavers from council tax? Quite rightly, that is not something the Government can do, but it is a practice that almost all councils should follow unless there is a very good reason why they are not doing it.

**Caroline Dinéage:** The hon. Gentleman represents Birmingham beautifully—Selly Oak and also other parts of Birmingham, as we have learned today. He makes a good point.

**Alex Cunningham:** He has broad shoulders.

**Caroline Dinéage:** He is clearly very talented. We would be very happy to do that, and I pay tribute to him for his work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for looked after children and care leavers. I would like very much to accept his offer to come and join that APPG for at least one of its meetings.

**Patricia Gibson:** The Minister talked about councils being written to, to remind them of their flexibility and how they can implement the council tax exemption. Is she willing to give some money from central Government to help local authorities absorb the exemption that they are willing to give? That has happened in Scotland, where between 6,000 and 7,000 care leavers will be exempted from council tax, up to the age of 26. Will any money from central Government be given to help local authorities, including those in Scotland and other parts of the UK, to fund that?

**Caroline Dinéage:** The hon. Lady tempts me to make spending commitments on behalf of the Department for Communities and Local Government. While I would, of course, be absolutely delighted to do so, it is a little bit beyond my job description. I am sure the Department will read with great interest her comments in *Hansard*.

**Norman Lamb:** I am grateful to the Minister for giving way; she is being very generous. The former Minister Edward Timpson introduced a very good reform to enable payments to continue to children in foster care beyond their 18th birthday, which was widely welcomed. However, if the rate paid for the most complex children being looked after by very experienced foster carers goes down at their 18th birthday, it creates an incentive for the foster carer to encourage them to leave, which is the very last thing we should be doing. Does she agree that we should seek to find ways of ensuring we provide incentives for them to stay at home, as happens in every other family?

**Caroline Dinéage:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for drawing attention to my former colleague, Edward Timpson, who was a most fantastic Minister in the Department for Education and a great advocate for care leavers. We are supporting the Staying Put arrangements that the right hon. Gentleman alluded to, which mean that care leavers who remain with their ex-foster carer can claim means-tested benefit from their 18th birthday up to the age of 21, but I will look at everything he has said.

In addition, we have exempted care leavers from the shared accommodation rate until they are 22. The shared accommodation rate is normally paid to single people aged under 35. That means that care leavers can claim the higher local housing allowance one-bedroom rate of housing benefit until their 22nd birthday.

I have listened to the arguments made by hon. Members about the issue today. I particularly welcome the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince); he gave an eloquent description. I also thank him for the significant contribution he has made as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on homelessness, where he does a sterling and very valuable job.

We have always said that this is something we would like to achieve, but at the moment we do not have plans to extend the exemption for care leavers from the shared accommodation rate to age 25. I assure my hon. Friend and other Members who have raised the issue today that we will continue to keep it under review and will consider evidence from stakeholders on the impact that the shared accommodation rate has on care leavers.

We have given care leavers priority access to personal budgeting support in universal credit. That includes benefit advances, rent paid direct to landlords, payments more frequent than monthly and budgeting advice, including debt advice, which was raised by the hon. Member for Stockton North.

We have a fantastic “See Potential” campaign—I say fantastic as it falls under my ministerial portfolio. It encourages employers to recognise the benefits of recruiting people from all kinds of backgrounds, including care leavers. I was so pleased to celebrate the inspiring workplace and training achievements of young people, including care leavers and others, at the Land Securities Community Employment Awards recently—we saw the incredible growth, development and achievement of some very inspiring young people.

I am pleased that the Government are leading by example by setting up a cross-Government scheme to provide employment to care leavers. My Department’s own care leaver team includes a quite brilliant care leaver intern, who I have had the pleasure of meeting, and who is providing us with very valuable insights into issues that care leavers face and helping us improve our services for care leavers. She is very cool as well—she is in the room, which is why I am saying that!

In developing our support for care leavers, we have worked closely with stakeholders. I am particularly grateful for the input from the Children’s Society, representatives of which I met shortly after being appointed to the Department. When I met with them, I was made aware of the fact that in some cases care leavers have difficulty taking up apprenticeships and a number of hon. Members have raised that today. We know that without the support of a family, they struggle economically. Having had that meeting, I hotfooted it straight over to the Department for Education and met the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills to discuss the idea of an apprenticeship bursary, which would ensure that apprenticeships were an affordable option for care leavers, who do not have the family support that most apprentices can rely on.

The Department for Education are reviewing how the new apprenticeship funding approach is supporting all those who are disadvantaged, including care leavers,

[*Caroline Dinenage*]

with the intention of improving how the system supports those individuals from 18 to 19, so that apprenticeships offer a more attractive opportunity to them and a greater chance of success. It has agreed to explore the proposal for an apprenticeship bursary.

The debate has raised some really important issues, and I am grateful to all right hon. and hon. Members for the points they have made, which will continue to inform our work to support care leavers, alongside our discussions with our valuable stakeholders.

**Alex Cunningham:** Just before the Minister sits down, there were two further points raised during the debate—first, the imposition of sanctions at a lower rate and, secondly, the opportunity to develop a way in which local authorities can work with care leavers applying for universal credit ahead of reaching their 18th birthday.

**Caroline Dinenage:** The hon. Gentleman is right to remind me about the sanctions—I pulled that little bit of paper out, but had forgotten to pick it up—but I think that I covered applications in advance of the 18th birthday earlier in my speech.

With regard to sanctions, I would like to stress that the Department for Work and Pensions recognises the unique set of circumstances faced by care leavers. Therefore, we allow care leavers to apply for hardship payments of 60% of their normal benefit payment from day one of the sanctions. Sanctions are used in a very small minority of cases, when people fail to meet each of the requirements that they agreed in their claimant commitment without good reason. That said, conditionality and sanctions are part of a fair and effective system that supports and encourages claimants to move into work, towards work or to improve their earnings. Work coaches are very well trained to deal with vulnerable claimants, and have the flexibility to tailor the requirements according to each individual's circumstances, and that includes the needs of care leavers.

We do not impose sanctions lightly. Claimants are given every opportunity to explain why they failed to meet their agreed conditionality requirements before a decision is made. A well-established system of hardship payments is available as a safeguard if a claimant demonstrates that they cannot meet their immediate and most essential needs, including accommodation, heating, food and hygiene, as a result of their sanction. UC claimants are able to apply for a hardship payment from the first accounting period in which the sanction reduction is applied.

I have spoken to care leavers, and we do not do them any favours by insulating them from the challenges of the day-to-day reality and responsibilities that their peers face. The care leavers I have spoken to tell me that they do not want to be wrapped in cotton wool. They want a little extra support and help, but they do not want to be entirely insulated from the challenges and responsibilities that their peers face.

I am pleased to have been able to put on the record our commitment to supporting care leavers and the action we are taking, but I hope I have made it clear that we are not complacent. I am passionate about improving the lives of care leavers. We are determined to ensure that the welfare system in general and universal credit in

particular help care leavers make a successful transition to independent living and working life, and that we support them as best as we can.

**Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair):** I call Alex Burghart to wind up.

4.11 pm

**Alex Burghart:** I thank the Minister for her very interesting statement, and I thank all hon. Members who took the time to participate in this important debate. It is a real pleasure to speak in a debate in which there is a lot of cross-party agreement both about the challenges that young people face and about some of the solutions. I welcome that.

To our friends in the Public Gallery who are listening, I want to say that there are a lot of other Members who wanted to be part of this debate, but a debate in the main Chamber on welfare ran over. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for coming. I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Birmingham in general—the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe)—and the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) for joining in.

I am particularly thankful to the hon. Member for Stockton North for acknowledging that Governments of all stripes have helped to improve the system as the years have gone by. He did not mention—neither did I—the important reform that Edward Timpson introduced, Staying Put, but we were put right by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). I am also grateful to the Minister for detailing some more of the exemptions, opportunities and reforms that DWP has introduced to improve outcomes for care leavers.

There is, of course, more to do. I was very interested to hear the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) about how we can help to prevent homelessness. I urge the Minister to look at the shared accommodation rate. I was pleased that she said that it is now possible for young people to set up their claim before they leave the care system. I hope that support is being given to work coaches and personal advisers to ensure that young people are aware of that opportunity and that they can get through it.

We have also had an interesting debate about how we help people in jobcentres to identify young people's needs early on. One of the ways of doing that may be to ensure better engagement by personal advisers and to set up meetings between the people who run the jobcentres and those who run the local children's services. As a number of Members said, that is being done well in Trafford.

I very much like the idea suggested by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak that councils should publish whether they are offering council tax exemptions for care leavers. That would be a good way of nudging some councils into doing the right thing, and it would also give councils that have already made the change the credit they deserve.

Lastly, I am delighted to hear that the DFE and the DWP are looking together at the issue of apprenticeships, with which we started the debate. I know not only that they are a great route into employment but, as the hon. Member for Stockton North said, that there is enormous potential in our care leavers. The care leavers I meet are

fizzing with ideas. I see in them future businesspeople, entrepreneurs, doctors, teachers and the like, but we must ensure that they fulfil that potential. I hope that this debate has brought to the fore a number of the ways in which DWP can play its part in ensuring that those young people get the best out of life.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the Department for Work and Pensions' support for care leavers.

4.15 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statements

Thursday 16 November 2017

## BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

### Contingency Liability: Mercator Ocean

**The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson):** Today I will lay before Parliament a departmental minute describing the purchase of a shareholding in Mercator Ocean and the resulting contingent liability.

Copernicus is the EU earth observation programme that monitors the global health of the planet. Mercator Ocean is the “co-ordinating entity” for the Copernicus marine services which provides free and open access to constantly updated information about the global ocean and the seas of the European region. Mercator Ocean is currently owned by five French public institutions with an interest/obligation to deliver research aligned to operational oceanography. It is broadening its ownership structure to be more in line with other delegated authorities.

The Secretary of State, acting through the Met Office, intends on 29 November 2017 to buy a 5% (€100k) share of Mercator Ocean, alongside equivalent organisations from Norway, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain.

The organisation is a “société civile” (a not-for-profit organisation) under French law, meaning it has unlimited liability, and its shareholders are exposed to liability risk in proportion to their shareholding. A remote contingent liability will therefore exist as long as the Secretary of State retains a shareholding in Mercator Ocean.

The organisation protects its shareholders through contractual mechanisms and through insurance. Also any residual claim would first be met from the assets of the company. Any contingent liability is considered to be extremely remote. In addition any contingent liability will cease to exist should the Met Office dispose of the shares, which it is able to do so at cost at any point within the first three years of ownership, and with six months’ notice after this point.

Regrettably, on this occasion pressing commercial requirements to procure the shares have meant that it has not been possible to provide the full 14 sitting days prior to taking on the contingent liabilities.

[HCWS255]

## CABINET OFFICE

### Social Care Update

**The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green):** Today the Government are setting out plans to publish a Green Paper by

summer recess 2018 presenting their proposals to reform care and support for older people. Reform of this vital sector has been a controversial issue for many years, but the realities of an ageing society mean that we must reach a sustainable settlement for the long term.

To achieve reform where previous attempts have failed, we must look more broadly than social care services alone, and not focus narrowly on questions of means-testing, important though these are. Our vision for care must also incorporate the wider networks of support and services which help older people to live independently, including the crucial role of housing and the interaction with other public services. It must consider how care is provided at present and challenge the system to embrace new technology, innovation and workforce models which can deliver better quality and value.

To deliver a lasting solution, it is right that we take the time needed to debate these complex issues and listen to a range of perspectives to build consensus. For this reason, over the coming months, we will work with experts, stakeholders and people using care and support services to shape the long-term reform which is urgently needed. The Government have already established an inter-ministerial group to oversee development of the Green Paper, and as part of this initial engagement we have asked a number of independent experts in this area to provide their views to the group. The Government will also engage closely with representatives from local government, the NHS, the voluntary sector and care providers, as well as with people who use care and support, to underpin development of the Green Paper. When the Green Paper is published, it will be subject to a full public consultation, providing a further opportunity for interested parties to give their views.

We recognise that many MPs and Peers are already engaging in the debate about the future of care and support, and we want to hear their views. I am therefore writing today to invite the chairs of relevant all-party parliamentary groups to meet me in the coming weeks to listen to their perspectives and priorities for the reform agenda.

While the Green Paper will focus on care for older people, the Government recognise both the challenges faced by people of working age with care needs and the many common questions about the sustainability of the care system. Many of the discussions on the Green Paper reforms will impact on care and support for adults of all ages. However, to ensure that issues for working-age adults with care needs are considered in their own right, the Government will take forward a parallel programme of work, led jointly by the Department of Health and the Department for Communities and Local Government, which will focus on this group. This work will also be overseen by the inter-ministerial group to ensure alignment with the Green Paper.

The Green Paper presents a unique opportunity to build consensus around reforms which can last. There is no escaping that building a sustainable care and support system will require choices about what that system should provide and how it is paid for. But getting this right promises a better system that everyone can have confidence in, where people understand their responsibilities, can prepare for the future, and know that the care they receive will be to a high standard and help them maintain their independence and wellbeing.

[HCWS258]

## COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### Local Plans

**The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid):** On 7 February we published our Housing White Paper in which we made clear that the housing market in this country is broken, and the cause is very simple: for too long, we have not built enough homes. We have identified three systemic problems: not enough local authorities planning for the homes they need; house building that is simply too slow; and a construction industry that is too reliant on a small number of big players.

Up-to-date plans, including local plans, are essential because they provide clarity to communities and developers about where homes should be built and where not, so that development is planned rather than the result of speculative applications. At present too few places have an up-to-date plan.

On 21 July 2015 we made a written ministerial statement to the House on this same subject. At that point 82% of authorities had published a local plan under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 regime. Today that figure stands at 92%.

In the 13 years that have passed since the 2004 Act received Royal Assent, over 70 local planning authorities have yet to adopt a plan and, of those, 27 authorities still have failed to reach the publication stage. I am particularly concerned about the 15 local planning authorities that have recently either failed the duty to co-operate or failed to meet the deadlines set out in their local development schemes, the public timetable that all local planning authorities are required to put in place.

I am therefore writing today to the local planning authorities of:

Basildon, Brentwood, Bolsover, Calderdale, Castle Point, Eastleigh, Liverpool, Mansfield, North East Derbyshire, Northumberland, Runnymede, St Albans, Thanet, Wirral and York.

These letters will start the formal process of intervention we set out in the Housing White Paper. We set out that we will prioritise intervention where:

- the least progress in plan-making has been made;
- policies in plans had not been kept up to date;
- there was higher housing pressure; and
- intervention would have the greatest impact in accelerating local plan production.

We also made clear that decisions on intervention will also be informed by the wider planning context in each area (specifically, the extent to which authorities are working co-operatively to put strategic plans in place, and the potential impact that not having a plan has on neighbourhood planning activity).

I am writing today to give the local authorities the opportunity to put forward any exceptional circumstances, by 31 January 2018, which, in their view, justify their failure to produce a local plan under the 2004 Act regime. I will take responses received into account before any final decisions on intervention are taken.

The remaining authorities who are not making progress on their plan-making and fail to publish a plan for consultation, submit a plan to examination or to keep

policies in plans up to date are on notice that consistent failure to make sufficient progress will no longer be tolerated. My Department will begin formally considering the case for intervention as deadlines are missed.

We will also bring forward the important provisions we legislated for earlier in the year through the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017. I will shortly lay the regulations under section 12 to prescribe that local planning authorities must review their plans every five years.

We will also shortly be commencing Section 8 of the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017 which will place a requirement on all local planning authorities to have plans in place for their area which set out their strategic policies. Those strategic priorities are set out at paragraph 156 of the National Planning Policy Framework.

As we set out in July 2015 we recognise that production of local plans is resource intensive. On 19 October 2017 we laid the regulations which, subject to approval of both Houses, will bring forward our White Paper commitment to increase planning fees by 20%. This delivers on our commitment to increase resources for local planning authorities where they commit to invest the additional fee income in their planning department. All local planning authorities in England have given this commitment. We will shortly announce details of the £25 million of funding to help local authorities plan for new homes and infrastructure in their area that we announced in the White Paper.

We have supported and we will continue to support, local planning authorities in plan-making, through the planning advisory service, with support from officials of my Department and the planning inspectorate.

Where local planning authorities continue to fail to produce a plan to provide certainty to their community on where future development will be brought forward, we will use our intervention powers to ensure plans are put in place.

[HCWS254]

## DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

### Civil Society Strategy

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch):** I wish to inform the House today of the Government's intention to develop a civil society strategy.

Civil society plays a vital role in the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities across our country, and in helping to address some burning injustices.

This strategy will provide an opportunity to explore ways to build new partnerships within and between sectors and communities, so that we can better mobilise resources and expertise and find practical new solutions to the problems we face. It will reaffirm the value that Government places on civil society. It will explore what more Government can do to support its work.

Civil society in England is broad. It encompasses the work of individuals, charities, youth organisations and communities. Civil society is increasingly diverse, with growing numbers of social enterprises, mission-led

businesses and public service mutuals, as well as many more private businesses and investors that want to make a meaningful contribution.

I would like the strategy to help shape the future direction for our work with and for civil society, and encompass all who have a role to play in building a stronger and fairer society.

It will be developed through dialogue and debate with people, groups, and organisations across government, businesses and wider civil society. It will build on engagements to date, including work with young people and youth organisations, as well as work to grow social impact investing, among others.

The Office for Civil Society, in the Department for Digital Culture Media and Sport, will lead this work, with input from the Department for Communities and Local Government and other Departments. A listening exercise will be launched in the new year and findings reported later in the year.

[HCWS252]

### Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley):** The Education, Youth, Culture and Sport (EYCS) Council will take place in Brussels on 20 and 21 November 2017. The UK's deputy permanent representative to the EU will represent the interests of the UK at the Youth, Culture and Sport sessions of this Council.

#### *Youth*

The Council will seek to gain a general approach among EU member states on the proposals laying down the framework for the European solidarity corps. The UK is proposing to vote in favour, subject to scrutiny. Also tabled is the adoption of draft Council conclusions on smart youth work, which the UK supports. This will be followed by a policy debate as proposed by the presidency. The Commission will also provide information on a new narrative for Europe.

#### *Culture and audiovisual*

The Council will begin by presenting, for adoption, draft Council conclusions on promoting access to culture via digital means, which will have a focus on audience development. The UK intends to support the adoption of these conclusions. This will be followed by a policy debate on the role of culture in building cohesive societies in Europe, as proposed by the presidency.

On audiovisual, the presidency is expected to provide an update on the audiovisual media services directive (AVMSD). This update will act as the first reading since the general approach was achieved at the last EYCS Council in May 2017. The discussion is expected to focus on the progress, thus far, of trilogue discussions between the Council and the European Parliament.

In addition to these files, the German delegation will provide information pertaining to the file on the regulation of the import of cultural goods. This file is at an early discussion stage. However it is anticipated that it will be implemented by January 2019, DCMS and HMRC are engaging with the member states in developing this policy.

Additional agenda items include for information items on international cultural relations, offences relating to cultural property, defence of cultural heritage, re-establishing Europe through culture and the mobility of artists.

#### *Sport*

There will be two non-legislative activities tabled regarding sport. Firstly, the adoption of the draft Council conclusions on the role of coaches in society. Secondly, adoption of the Council resolution on the EU structured dialogue on sport. The UK intends to support the adoption of both sets of conclusions. These will be followed by a policy debate on the main challenges facing sport in the 21st century and co-operation between the EU, Governments and sport movement, as proposed by the presidency in accordance with the Council rules of procedure.

Information will be provided from the EU member states representatives in the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA foundation board). This will act as a follow up to WADA meetings in Seoul on 15 and 16 November 2017. The Greek delegation will also provide information to the Council on supporting the Olympic truce during the 2018 Winter Olympic Games in Pyeongchang, South Korea.

#### *Other*

The Council will be receiving information from the Bulgarian delegation, as the incoming presidency in the first half of 2018, to set out their work programme for the next six months.

[HCWS250]

## EDUCATION

### Schools and Early Years Update

**The Minister for Children and Families (Mr Robert Goodwill):** Today the Government are launching a public consultation on their proposed approach to revising the entitlement criteria for free school meals and the early years pupil premium, in light of the national roll out of universal credit.

Universal credit is replacing a number of qualifying benefits for free school meals, such as job seeker's allowance, child's tax credit and income support.

Subject to the outcome of this consultation, we propose to introduce a net earned income threshold of £7,400 per annum for those in receipt of universal credit. A typical family earning around £7,400 per annum would, depending on their exact circumstances, have a total household income between £18,000 and £24,000 once benefits are taken into account. A threshold of £7,400 will increase the free school meals cohort by approximately 5% once universal credit is fully rolled out and in steady state. This equates to approximately 50,000 additional pupils being eligible to receive a nutritious free school meal than currently.

Furthermore, to ensure that no child who currently benefits from a free school meal loses this entitlement as a result of this criteria change, we aim to protect current beneficiaries' eligibility up until the end of the roll-out

of universal credit. From that point on, all children should retain this protection for the rest of their current phase of education.

The economic eligibility criteria for the early years pupil premium are the same as for free school meals. We believe that this consistency is important so that the most disadvantaged families benefit from this additional funding across the whole age range. As such, we propose to apply the same threshold as mentioned above for free school meals to the early years pupil premium, and to mirror the protection arrangements for current beneficiaries during the UC roll-out period.

If, following the public consultation and subject to the will of the House, the Government decide to take forward their proposals, we expect the revised regulations to come into force in April 2018.

The “Eligibility for free school meals and early years pupil premium under universal credit” consultation will commence today and run for eight weeks. The consultation document containing full details of the proposals and inviting responses will be published on the Department for Education’s website. Copies of the consultation document will also be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-11-16/HCWS260/>.

[HCWS260]

## ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

### Water Protocol: England and Wales

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove):** In conjunction with the Secretary of State for Wales I will today lay before the House a water protocol for England and Wales, agreed between the UK Government and the Welsh Government. The protocol, which the Welsh Ministers are laying in the National Assembly for Wales in parallel, is made under Section 50 of the Wales Act 2017.

The protocol reaffirms the close working between the two Governments on matters relating to water resources, water supply and water quality. It underlines our commitment that no action or inaction by either Administration should have any serious adverse impact on either England or Wales and crucially, that the interests of water consumers on both sides of our borders are safeguarded.

Agreement of the protocol paves the way for the Secretary of State’s powers of intervention in relation to water to be repealed. These powers, in the Government of Wales Act 2006, enable the Secretary of State to intervene if they believe an Assembly Bill, or the exercise of a devolved function, risks having a serious adverse impact on water resources, water supply or water quality in England.

The protocol replaces these intervention powers with a reciprocal agreement. The intervention powers will be repealed when the new reserved powers model of Welsh devolution come into effect on 1 April 2018.

[HCWS251]

## EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

### General Affairs Council

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker):** My hon. Friend Lord Callanan, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

I will be attending the General Affairs Council in Brussels on 20 November 2017 to represent the UK’s interests. Until we leave the European Union, we remain committed to fulfilling our rights and obligations as a full member.

The provisional agenda includes:

*Preparation of the European Council, 14 and 15 December 2017*

There will be a discussion on the agenda for the December European Council. This includes: defence, focusing on the launch of PESCO (permanent structured co-operation) and a review of EU-NATO co-operation; social, education and culture, which includes a follow up to the November Gothenburg social summit; migration, involving a leaders’ debate on both the internal and external dimensions of migration as part of Donald Tusk’s leader’s agenda; and external relations.

*European Council follow-up*

The presidency will give an update on the implementation of the October European Council conclusions on migration, digital Europe, security and defence, and external relations.

*Legislative programming—Commission’s work programme for 2018 (CWP 2018)*

Commission First Vice-President Frans Timmermans will present the CWP 2018, which sets out the legislation and other initiatives that the Commission intends to present to the Council of Ministers and European Parliament over the coming year.

*Interinstitutional agreements (IIA) implementation*

The presidency will lay out what progress has been made on the interinstitutional agreement on better law-making (IIA), signed by the Presidents of the European Council, Commission and Parliament in April 2016. The IIA set out the commitments of these institutions regarding better regulation, interinstitutional relations and the legislative process.

*European semester 2018*

The presidency will introduce the timetable for the European semester 2018, which will provide a framework for the co-ordination of economic policies across the EU.

[HCWS248]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Disclosure and Barring Service: Annual Report

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins):** The 2016-17 Annual Report and Accounts for the Disclosure and Barring Service (HC178) is being laid before the House today and published on [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk). Copies will be available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS256]

### **Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000: Codes of Practice**

**The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace):** I am today publishing three revised codes of practice for consultation under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000.

The consultation is in relation to the following codes:

The covert surveillance and property interference code of practice

The covert human intelligence sources code of practice

These codes provide guidance on the authorisation of directed surveillance, intrusive surveillance and covert human intelligence sources under part 2 of RIPA, as well as property interference under the Police Act 1997 and Intelligence Services Act 1994. These powers are available to law enforcement and intelligence agencies as well as a number of other public authorities specified under RIPA, for use where necessary and proportionate for purposes such as the prevention or detection of crime, and the protection of national security. The codes reinforce the safeguards provided by the Acts, for the careful and lawful deployment, management and oversight of the powers.

The investigation of protected information code of practice

This code sets out guidance on the use of powers under part 3 of RIPA governing the investigation of protected electronic information, usually in pursuance of a criminal investigation.

The three codes are being updated to reflect changes in the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 which will impact on the use of the powers covered by the codes. In particular the codes reflect the creation of the new Investigatory Powers Commissioner, who has replaced the three existing oversight bodies, the requirement for public authorities to report errors to the commissioner, and the new arrangements for authorisation of equipment interference which will apply in future to some techniques currently authorised under property interference provisions, and be relevant for use of the power under part 3 of RIPA. At the same time the guidance in the codes under part 2 of RIPA are being updated to reflect best practice in authorisation and management of the powers, to strengthen the safeguards relating to handling of confidential or legally privileged material, and to clarify the application of the RIPA framework to online investigation and research.

The consultation will last for six weeks. Copies of the consultation document and draft codes will be placed in the Library of the House. Online versions will be available on the [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) website.

[HCWS257]

## **NORTHERN IRELAND**

### **Universal Credit: Northern Ireland Implementation**

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chloe Smith):** In the light of recent questions in the House, I wish to set out the policy and respective responsibilities regarding the non-consensual conception

exception to the policy to provide additional support in child tax credit and universal credit, and its interaction with Northern Ireland criminal law.

There has been particular focus on Section 5 of the Criminal Law Act (NI) 1967. This provides that where a relevant offence has been committed, it shall be the duty of every other person who knows or believes that the offence has been committed and that has information which is likely to secure, or to be of material assistance in securing the apprehension, prosecution or conviction of any person for that offence, to give the information, otherwise they shall be guilty of an offence, unless they have a reasonable excuse. This provision is not new, nor has it been affected in any way by the implementation of universal credit in Northern Ireland. Its implications for those who are victims of crime, including rape, date back to 1967. And as criminal law is a devolved matter, the UK Government have no role in determining the appropriateness of this particular provision, nor in proposing any amendment to it. What is more, we understand that there has not been a single prosecution of a victim of rape under section 5 of the 1967 Act in 50 years. That means that there is no recorded case where it has been considered that those limbs of the prosecutorial test have been met since 1967.

As to the non-consensual conception exception more broadly, it is an important part of the two-child limit policy. It is in place to protect those who are not always able to make choices about the number of children in their family. But given its complex and sensitive nature, great care is taken in its application right across the United Kingdom. We have worked with the Department for Communities, given that the administration of universal credit is a devolved matter, to ensure the same is true in Northern Ireland.

In particular, the legal position is made very clear on the forms and guidance for child tax credits and universal credit, so that both the claimant and the third party professional are clear before any disclosure is made:

“Please be aware, that in Northern Ireland, if the third party knows or believes that a relevant offence (such as rape) has been committed, the third party will normally have a duty to inform the police of any information that is likely to secure, or to be of material assistance in securing, the apprehension, prosecution or conviction of someone for that offence”.

In addition, claimants applying for this exception will be told that they do not have to tell the third party professional the name of the child’s other biological parent. Nor is there a requirement on the approved third party professional to seek any further evidence to confirm the circumstances around the conception of the child beyond what the claimant has described to them. The role of a third party professional will simply be to confirm, by ticking boxes on a form, that the claimant has made a declaration to them which is consistent with the criteria for the non-consensual conception exception in relation to their child. No officials of either the UK Government or the Northern Ireland Civil Service will question a claimant about an incident. You can find details of the guidance and the forms online (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/publications/form-ncc1niis-support-child-conceived-without-your-consent>).

Taken as a whole, therefore, the implementation of universal credit in Northern Ireland has been undertaken in a way that reflects the interests of claimants on the

one hand, and the interests of those taxpayers who support themselves solely through work on the other. Ultimately, however, given the devolution settlement, the questions raised are properly for a restored Northern Ireland Executive.

[HCWS259]

## PRIME MINISTER

### Machinery of Government Change: Gender Recognition Act

**The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May):** This written statement confirms that responsibility for the Gender Recognition Act 2004 will transfer from the Ministry of Justice to the Government Equalities Office. This change will be effective immediately.

[HCWS253]

## WORK AND PENSIONS

### Pensions

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman):** The Government have now completed the examination of the cap that applies to member-borne charges in default investment funds within defined contribution (DC) pension schemes used for automatic enrolment (AE).w

After seeking a range of industry and consumer views and considering the findings of the recent pension charges survey, which captures data from providers covering 14.4 million scheme members, we do not feel that now is the right time to change the level or scope of the cap.

The cap is working broadly as intended, helping to drive down member-borne costs, while allowing flexibility to allow asset diversity or tailored services for members and employers. It appears some small schemes are less able to take advantage of the most competitive market rates, and we have launched proposals to simplify the scheme consolidation process. This will allow smaller schemes who cannot secure value for money in the long term to exit the market and secure a better deal for their members elsewhere.

There continues to be a lack of transparency on transaction costs, which is hindering trustees and independent governance committees' (IGC) attempts to monitor and evaluate whether these represent value. We believe that it is vital to get disclosure right before deciding on whether a cap on transaction costs is appropriate. Recently announced DWP legislative proposals will ensure trustees have sight of these costs and can give that information to members. The FCA is developing similar rules for providers.

The Government remain committed to ensuring AE members are protected from unreasonable and unfair charges, and recognise that there is ongoing concern among consumers.

We will actively monitor the situation, by reviewing the information which trustees of DC schemes will be required to publish from April 2018, and which providers will publish in due course, to monitor whether the downward trend in charges is continuing.

That will also inform our next review. In 2020 we intend to examine the level and scope of the charge cap, as well as permitted charging structures, to see whether a change is needed to protect members. This will also allow us to evaluate the effects of the next stage of AE and the new master trust and transaction costs regimes.

While we are not pre-judging the decision, we expect there to be a much clearer case for change in 2020.

[HCWS249]

# Petitions

*Thursday 16 November 2017*

## PRESENTED PETITIONS

*Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor*

### Emotional Assistance Pet Act

*The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,*

Declares that there is compelling evidence from clinical and laboratory studies that interacting with pets can be beneficial to the physical, social and emotional well-being of humans and that the human-animal emotional bond does not differ from the one that we sustain in relation to close family members; further that the twenty-first century is the beginning of the revolution in ethics related to scientific evidence regarding consciousness in animals—now confirmed that it is astonishingly close to humans; further that mental health services in the UK are overstretched, have long waiting times and a lack of specialist services in some regions; further that the Mental Health Foundation also recognises the value of “pet therapy” in suicide prevention and treating depression and treating depression leading to it; further that there is no scientific research (to support the thesis that tenants who have pets are worse, more difficult or cause more damage to properties than those who do not); and further that almost all tenancy agreements, by default, contain a no pet clause, which is nothing more than prejudiced practice, as a result, people who have pets are especially victimised in their attempt to simply put a roof over their heads in their difficult housing crisis context.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to introduce legislation that recognises the importance of the emotional relationship of man and their non-human family members; further to put the interest of the most vulnerable and the public interest above the right of property owners if the property is a subject of commercial gain; and further that the legislation should allow the emotional support animal access in housing facilities, even when the complex has a no pet policy or breed/weight discriminatory policies.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by Grant Shapps.]*

[P002079]

### Fair Funding for Schools

*The petition of residents of Ilkley and Wharfedale,*

Declares that the cuts in spending in schools in Ilkley and Wharfedale will lead to redundancies amongst teachers and teaching assistants, increasing class sizes, reduction in the range of subjects on offer and a decline in educational standards.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reverse the cuts that have been made to school budgets in Ilkley and Wharfedale; further to protect per pupil funding in real terms in the schools of Ilkley and Wharfedale over the lifetime of this Parliament; and further to ensure no school loses out in real terms as a result of any new funding formula.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by John Grogan.]*

[P002080]



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**Thursday 23 November 2017**

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