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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 30 November 2017

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

North-south Rail Connections

1. **Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve north-south rail connections in the UK. [902655]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): May I start by making the House aware of the fact that, as you are aware, Mr Speaker, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), is unfortunately not with us this morning, because he has been invited to appear before a Select Committee. I am sure you will share my slight disappointment that any Committee would call a Minister when he is supposed to be giving oral answers to the House, but that is his reason for not being here.

The two things we are doing to improve north-south rail connections in the UK are, first, building High Speed 2—the first new north-south railway in this country for over a century, which will have a transformational effect on people in the midlands, the north of England and Scotland. We will also shortly see the arrival of the new fleet of inter-city express trains, which will operate on the east coast main line, enabling additional and faster services between key locations on the route. Of course, those trains will run right up the east coast to Scotland.

Luke Graham: I thank my right hon. Friend for that. While acknowledging that rail funding will increase from £3 billion to £3.6 billion in the next spending period, may I ask what consideration has been given to improved road connections between Scotland and England, especially along the east coast?

Chris Grayling: The east coast is the key priority in road-building terms. We are very close to opening what will, extraordinarily, be the last bit of motorway linking London and Newcastle; it is long, long overdue, and I am amazed it has not happened already. We are then pressing ahead with dualling the A1 north of Newcastle, and my goal is to take that up to the border, but it will be for the SNP and the Scottish Government to make sure that something is there to meet us coming the other way.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister might know that I have probably done more miles on the east coast line than any other Member of

this House. May I tell him, with that experience, that it is chaos again on the east coast? Stagecoach is being let off the obligation to pay the full money it should be paying to the British Exchequer. Yet again, the east coast line is in a mess, and he is doing nothing about it.

Mr Speaker: I am very glad that the hon. Gentleman has already recovered from his obvious misery at Arsenal's demolition of his team by five goals to nil last night.

Chris Grayling: A tiny bit below the belt, I think, Mr Speaker, but the hon. Gentleman seems to have weathered the storm pretty well.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, notwithstanding issues on the east coast main line, passenger satisfaction on that route has actually improved rather than reduced; indeed, the money flowing to the taxpayer has increased rather than reduced, so he is slightly misjudging the current position.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): The Secretary of State knows how important the east coast main line is to Newark and my constituents. In recent years, Network Rail's performance has been poor, and the track does need considerable investment. That is the principal reason why delays have increased on the east coast main line. Will the new public-private partnership see more investment and improvements on the track?

Chris Grayling: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. In fact, we have a substantial investment programme lined up for the east coast main line, upgrading power supplies and improving the tracks, and that will certainly be steered by the new partnership.

21. [902678] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): The Secretary of State referred to the dualling of the A1. Does he understand the deep disappointment at the postponing of the A1 Coal House roundabout scheme, and will he look at that again, please?

Chris Grayling: We have been ensuring simply that we phase projects to cause the minimum possible disruption to users of the roads, while making sure the rolling programme goes forward. I am very proud of the fact that, as a Conservative Government, we are the ones transforming the A1—a project that is long, long overdue.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): To go back to rail funding, the Secretary of State is well aware that there is a £600 million gap in the allocation of funding to Scotland for the next investment period. Previously, rail funding to Scotland was based on its percentage of the network—that funding formula was developed in 2005—so will he explain why, if he thinks north-south rail links are a priority, he is quite happy for there to be a cut in rail funding on his watch?

Chris Grayling: As I keep saying to the hon. Gentleman, I am very happy that funding is allocated to Scotland on the basis of the Barnett formula. I thought that was the way things worked.

Alan Brown: Let me explain to the Secretary of State that the previous rail funding was based on need and on Scotland's percentage of the rail network. Helpfully, the other day the Secretary of State for Business, Energy

and Industrial Strategy acknowledged that the allocation of funding to Scotland for infrastructure should be based on need and geography, and it should be the same for rail. In answer to a question tabled in October, the Secretary of State for Transport said he has “various discussions” with the Secretary of State in Scotland only “from time to time”. Is it not time that he prioritised this issue, and will he agree to meet me and the Transport Secretary for Scotland to discuss the budget and north-south linkages?

Chris Grayling: If the hon. Gentleman wants to meet the Government to discuss the removal of the Barnett formula and the move towards needs-based allocation of funding across the piece for Scotland, I am sure that would be a very interesting discussion; but in this country over the past few years we have tended to follow the Barnett formula. Most recently, we have provided additional funding to Scotland through the allocations in the Budget. Money has been spent on capital investment in England and money is to be spent based on the Barnett formula in Scotland. That is the way we operate.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): We learned yesterday that the east coast rail franchise will be terminated in 2020—three years early—potentially forfeiting billions of pounds in premiums due to the Treasury, yet the Secretary of State told the House that Stagecoach will meet in full the commitments it made to the Government as part of this contract. So, can he confirm that the full £3.3 billion due from Stagecoach-Virgin will be paid to the Treasury, in accordance with the terms of the original contract?

Chris Grayling: Every time a franchisee takes up a new contract it makes a parent company commitment to the Government. That commitment will be kept in full.

Andy McDonald: Can we get to the heart of this? Will the premiums of some £2 billion due under that contract covering the years 2020 to 2023 be paid? Will they be paid—yes or no?

Chris Grayling: Self-evidently, given my announcement yesterday that we would have the east coast partnership in place in 2020, there will be new arrangements in place in 2020. As I have said to the hon. Gentleman, every franchisee makes a parent company commitment before taking out the contract and we will hold that that commitment will be met in full.

Express Train Services

2. **Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve express train services. [902656]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (**Paul Maynard**): Only last month new inter-city express trains entered service on Great Western, and indeed east coast will be introducing new Azuma express trains from late 2018. We have also committed £55.7 billion on HS2 to transform the network and bring economic growth between our major cities, operating state-of-the-art trains.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the Minister for his answer and I welcome the rail strategy that was announced yesterday in the House. My right hon. Friend the Secretary

of State knows of my keen interest in the express services from Redditch to Birmingham, and I am grateful for the interest he has shown by meeting me. Will the rail Minister agree to meet me and the train operators in the light of the new franchise that has been announced for our services, to look again at the business case and see whether we can push this issue forward?

Paul Maynard: I am always happy to meet colleagues, and train operating companies—indeed, at the same time is even better for me. We always seek journey time improvements on networks, not least by improving roll-out times for new rolling stock. I know that my hon. Friend will welcome the fact that we have earlier and later services from Redditch into Birmingham, and an increased frequency. I am more than happy to meet her to discuss what more can be done.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): One of the ways of improving express train services is to open up new routes. Does the Minister agree with me and his right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) that the opening up of a route from Chester via Wrexham and Shrewsbury to London would ease pressures on the Chester-London service and be an excellent, novel way of addressing capacity difficulties on the line?

Paul Maynard: I know that the hon. Gentleman listened carefully to yesterday’s strategy announcement, in which he will have heard a lot of reference to reopening lines and opening new lines. I am sure that we will be considering that idea further and I look forward to hearing further details.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Government have embarked on the biggest upgrade programme for our railways since the Victorian era. What role can that play in addressing the pressing need to improve our productivity in this country?

Paul Maynard: My right hon. Friend is quite right to point out that our significant investment in the railways is underpinned by our belief that we need to improve productivity. Just today, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will launch the HS2 productivity report in Nottingham, which will set out how we intend to use HS2 to improve our productivity performance here in the UK.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): There is a lot of talk about improvements to the midland main line. Currently, the last train from Sheffield to London leaves some two hours earlier than the last train from other cities such as Manchester and Bristol. Will the Minister assure us that when the new franchise is let, that aspect of poor service delivery will be addressed?

Paul Maynard: I was not aware of the precise information regarding late services from Sheffield, but I am sure they are as entitled to a late departure as any other city in the north. We are looking carefully at the timetable as part of the new franchise, and I am sure that will be taken into account, given that the hon. Gentleman has raised it.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Will the rail Minister say what discussions have been held with freight users about short-notice terminations of freight trains causing hundreds of tonnes of cargo to move on to our roads?

Paul Maynard: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue of freight. It is an important part of our railway that perhaps gets overlooked by many who do not think carefully about how we utilise our rail network. I have frequent meetings with the rail sector and frequent engagement with officials in the Department. We always look to embed concerns about freight in any decisions that we take about the future of the network.

Tyres: Safety

3. **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the safety implications of tyres on motor vehicles being more than 10 years old. [902657]

16. **Maria Eagle** (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): If he will ban the use of tyres more than 10 years old on public service vehicles. [902671]

The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes): The Department for Transport consulted the European tyre manufacturing industry association and its clear advice was that beyond the age of a tyre, its use and maintenance are significant factors in the ageing process.

Mr Cunningham: Surveys show that 27% of drivers do not check or maintain their tyres. What is the Minister doing to raise public awareness about this?

Mr Hayes: We are acting on exactly that matter. The Department has introduced measures to manage the use of tyres aged 10 years or more on the steering axles of buses and coaches. Written copies of our guidance have been delivered to every single bus and coach operator in Great Britain. The guidance reflects best practice and supplements separate advice on the use of older tyres.

Maria Eagle: My Tyres (Buses and Coaches) Bill, which was published this week, is down on the Order Paper for a Second Reading tomorrow. Can the Minister confirm that he and his party will not seek to oppose the legislation?

Mr Hayes: The hon. Lady has particular knowledge of this matter. I know that one of her constituents died in an accident relating to a tyre. The hon. Lady came to see the previous Secretary of State, and I know that she has seen the roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) about the matter. She is right to take it seriously.

Although I am not going to comment on the question that the hon. Lady asked me—you would not expect me to, Mr Speaker—I will say this to her, and I hope that she will respect how seriously I take the matter. We have issued the new guidance, but I think there is a need for more research, and I am prepared today to commit my Department to engaging in further research with the experts in the industry and others to establish exactly the effect of tyres' age on safety and security. The safe and secure passage of people is our first priority, and we will do all that is necessary to secure it.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): The Tyred campaign was highlighted to me at party conference. As someone who formerly worked in road safety, what I found out

was shocking to me, particularly because many of our children travel to school in coaches. I am delighted to hear from the Minister that the Department is undertaking to do more work on the matter. Many visitors to our constituencies come by coach, so can we commit to taking real action to ensure that no more people die in this way?

Mr Hayes: Absolutely; I understand the point that my hon. Friend makes, and the tragedy that I mentioned in my previous answer involved a young person. My hon. Friend is right that public safety is an absolute priority, so the Department has liaised closely with the British tyre industry to develop a comprehensive guide to good practice. The guide gave a clear recommendation that older tyres should simply not be used on the front axle. As I have said, I want to do more and go further, which is why I will look at the matter in even greater detail.

High Speed 2

4. **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): What steps he is taking to maintain the operation of national road infrastructure during the construction of High Speed 2. [902658]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): I know my hon. Friend has concerns about the impact of HS2 on the major roads in his constituency. The project has a number of measures in place to minimise the impact of HS2 on the road network. HS2 Ltd is working closely with local highway authorities and Highways England.

Jeremy Lefroy: At the risk of clogging up my hon. Friend's diary, will he meet me, other Staffordshire MPs and representatives from Staffordshire County Council, the city of Stoke-on-Trent and Highways England to ensure that preparations that are adequate, or more than adequate, are made so that the construction of this railway, if it goes ahead, does not damage regional and national business?

Paul Maynard: My hon. Friend need have no fear about clogging up my diary. It is always a pleasure to meet him, not least because I believe it is absolutely critical that we properly understand the impact on local roads and that all the relevant stakeholders, including local authorities, sit around the table with HS2 to address the details of its proposals.

15. [902670] **Mrs Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I welcome the announcement from the Department for Transport last week of the £30 million that will be spent to improve road safety along phase 1 of HS2, but will the Minister advise me how the Department assesses the fairest way to distribute this money? Approximately a third of the route will be constructed in Buckinghamshire, but the council will receive less than £4 million of this funding.

Paul Maynard: My right hon. Friend makes a valuable point. Part of what we have to consider is where there is the biggest impact on local roads. Where there is more extensive tunnelling, as in Buckinghamshire, less of the road network will be affected. I will, however, look carefully at her comment and, if I may, I will respond to her by letter with the precise formula.

Regional Expenditure

5. **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the regional distribution of transport spending. [902659]

6. **Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the regional distribution of transport spending. [902660]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

We recognise the importance of using infrastructure projects to support regional growth, which is why we are increasing Government infrastructure investment by 50% over the next four years. Such investment decisions are based on a fair and rigorous process that is designed to ensure that spending goes where it is most needed.

Mike Amesbury: Will the Secretary of State put some power—some oomph—into the northern powerhouse, and pledge to get funding for passenger trains and platforms on to the existing Mid Cheshire rail link?

Chris Grayling: As somebody who used to live very close to the Mid Cheshire rail link—indeed, I used to go walking alongside it—I am well aware of its potential. I have asked Transport for the North, which is taking the lead on making recommendations about new projects, to do work on this for me, but I should say to the hon. Gentleman that I am extremely sympathetic to the idea of trains running again on that railway line.

Ian Mearns: Between 2011 and 2016, the average spending per head of the population on transport infrastructure in London was £725, but the similar figure for the north-east was £286. The investment in Tyne and Wear Metro, which is due in three or four years' time, is very welcome, but we have a very long historical legacy of under-investment. Will the new formula do something about that historical legacy of under-investment?

Chris Grayling: To be honest, I am less concerned with formulae than with actually doing things. I am delighted that we are renewing the Metro trains, and I said yesterday that I am very keen to pursue the Blyth to Ashington extension to the Metro line. I am very keen to ensure that we continue to develop the road network in the north-east, which is why the opening of the first complete motorway link from London to Newcastle is so important, why we need to keep on improving the A1 north of Newcastle and why dualling the A66 is so important. This is about doing things, and that is what is actually happening right now.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that doubling the line from Ely to Soham, as part of the Ely area improvement works, will bring significant benefits to the eastern region?

Chris Grayling: Absolutely. I regard this, along with the trans-Pennine upgrade, as one of the key priorities for the next railway investment control period. The Ely junction project will unlock freight and passenger capacity

in a really important part of the country. Along with the investments we are putting in place elsewhere, it is a very important part of our strategy.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his support in securing £79 million of funding for a new link road from St Austell to the A30 in my constituency, as confirmed in the Budget last week. Does he agree that this and other schemes, such as dualling the A30 and the new trains that are soon to arrive in Cornwall, clearly demonstrate this Government's commitment to investing in transport infrastructure across the whole country?

Chris Grayling: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments, and I am very pleased that we have got the go-ahead to deliver that road improvement for the people of Cornwall. It is really important for the regions of this country—whether the north-east or the south-west—and particularly areas that need to be given more infrastructure support so that their economies develop, to get the kind of investments that they are now getting, and we are very committed to going forward with that in the future.

17. [902673] **Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Last week, the Chancellor announced an extension to youth railcards, but young people in my constituency have to take the bus to college, and the cheapest fare for a 17-year-old is £28 a week. Will the Secretary of State take some measures to help young people in the north as well as in the south?

Chris Grayling: Bus fares are something over which my Department has less control, particularly with the new franchising arrangements that are coming into place, but I will most certainly make sure that the Under-Secretary of State for Transport who is responsible for buses, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), is aware of the hon. Lady's concerns and that we respond to her.

Rail Electrification

7. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What his policy is on rail electrification. [902661]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The Government are committed to ensuring that our continued levels of record investment best address the needs of passengers and freight. Passengers expect high-quality rail services, and we are committed to electrification where it delivers genuine benefits to passengers and value for money for the taxpayer.

Diana Johnson: No rail system can be called high speed unless it is electric. After blocking Hull's privately financed rail electrification scheme a year ago, yesterday, the Transport Secretary told the House—I am sure he will recall this—that the Liverpool to Hull Crossrail for the north would happen in parallel with the Surrey to Hertfordshire Crossrail 2. Will both lines be electrified, just as Crossrail 1 is electric?

Chris Grayling: At a time when we are seeing technology move very fast, people have to get away from a set focus on an individual form of motor power. Not every

125 mph train has to be powered by a particular power source. In the coming years we will see more development of bi-mode technology, battery technology and hydrogen technology. We will use the systems that make the most difference to the passenger the most cost-effectively.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Despite the creaking electrification infrastructure on the east coast, the 43-page “Connecting People” was jammed with funding reannouncements, possible reopenings, readjusted delivery dates, delayed promises and a lot of words to try to hide what we all now know was the central purpose—to conceal the deal on the failed Stagecoach franchise.

The new partnership that passengers want is their trains to arrive on time, so when will we see the upgrade to the electrification works needed on the east coast?

Chris Grayling: As I said earlier, the key point is that the next investment control period contains a programme of continued upgrade and investment for the east coast main line, to go along with the arrival of a new generation of smart, new, effective, passenger-friendly trains. All of that will happen so that we deliver those improvements and passenger services. Having heard the shadow Secretary of State’s questions earlier, I think that he has not understood that this will be a completely fresh partnership with potentially new partners and a new way forward, delivering better services for passengers in a more joined up way.

Rachael Maskell: More structural changes, but the electrification wait continues. Let us look at these new rail partnerships. They are moving a public service to the control of private companies. This is not devolution to the rail authorities or to the people, it is devolution to the shareholders; it is further fragmentation and privatisation of the railway, failed operators now being handed the tracks as well as the trains, and nothing to address the electrification upgrade.

Is it to recoup these costs that the ticket prices will be soaring by 32% since 2010 after Christmas?

Chris Grayling: Two points: Labour Members should remember how much fares rose when they were in power; and they might like to explain why their friends in the unions have in their training manuals a requirement for negotiation for RPI increases in the future. Why is that? Why do they not tell their union friends to change their ways of operation?

Potholes

8. **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce the number of potholes. [902662]

The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes): The Government are providing local highway authorities in England, outside London, £296 million between 2016 and 2021. That includes an extra £46 million that was announced in the autumn Budget last week. I am sure that local authorities right across the country will welcome their share of funding and put it to good use.

Alex Burghart: We have heard some thoughtful remarks about tyre quality on both sides of the House this morning, and road quality is the flip side of that coin. Many of my constituents suffer from pothole-marked roads. In our Conservative manifesto this year we committed to improve the quality of roads and fill potholes. Will my right hon. Friend tell my constituents that we remain committed to that?

Mr Hayes: Potholes are a menace; they are a drain on the economy and damage hard-working family cars. That is why the funding that the Government are providing local authorities in England outside London from the pothole action fund is enough to fix nearly 6 million potholes—or, even better, to stop them from forming in the first place. People deserve to see smooth and safe roads as they look back in Ongar.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): In 2006, the annual local road maintenance study estimated that it would take nine years to repair every pothole on our local roads. Fourteen years have now passed. How long does the Minister think it acceptable for motorists and cyclists to wait to see the necessary investment coming from the Government to repair potholes on our local roads?

Mr Hayes: It is always a mistake for someone to prepare their question before they have heard the previous answer, and if the hon. Gentleman had heard the previous answer he would have asked a different question. Notwithstanding that—[*Interruption.*] I do not mean to be unkind to the hon. Gentleman; he is right to raise the issue. Potholes are a nightmare, and we have made that absolutely clear. That is why we are putting the money in place to deal with them. There is always more that we can do, and I will take his question as a spur to do still more.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Although the A180 suffers from its fair share of potholes, the bigger problem for road users and residents in Healing and Stallingborough is the concrete surface. I urge the Minister to have discussions with Highways England to see how a phased programme to replace the concrete surface could be introduced.

Mr Hayes: This is not the first time that my hon. Friend, with typical assiduity and diligence, has raised the issue of that concrete surface—indeed, he has raised it with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. I am inclined to visit my hon. Friend and drive on that road with him to see for myself exactly what is happening. Having done so, I will certainly look again at all we can do to improve that surface and other road surfaces, as the Secretary of State has committed to do. My hon. Friend is right: road surfaces make a difference, and they deserve our close attention. They will certainly get mine.

Private Sector Investment

9. **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What assessment he has made of the role of private sector investment in improving rail services for passengers. [902663]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State told the House only yesterday, the private sector has generated almost £6 billion of private investment over the past decade, providing new trains, upgrading stations and transforming the passenger experience.

Jack Breerton: I thank my hon. Friend for that response. Will he please inform the House about what measures are being taken to improve services on the Crewe-Derby line—the north Staffordshire line—that runs through my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent South?

Paul Maynard: I share my hon. Friend's concerns about the line; I often have to travel on it back to Blackpool myself. When I am in the east midlands, I am often struck by the fact that there is usually only a two-carriage train that is not always fit for the demand on that line. As he will know, the east midlands consultation is ongoing at the moment. We are carefully considering the responses, which include my hon. Friend's. I am sure that we will see further improvements in the line as part of the bids that come forward.

19. [902675] **Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con):** I particularly welcome the document that came out yesterday and the point it makes about regional rail partnerships, which many experts agree are the answer for driving passenger satisfaction and value for money. They should be the first stage towards vertically integrated companies. Will the Minister confirm that that might be the final destination for those partnerships?

Paul Maynard: As the Secretary of State said yesterday, this is all about evolution rather than revolution. We have been aware since the time of the McNulty report of the attraction of bringing track and train together, and we need to make sure that such alliances work in the interests of passengers. The more that that occurs and the more we see the benefits of joint working, the more those benefits will develop across the entire rail network.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I welcome the publication yesterday of the invitation to tender for the South Eastern franchise. When the new franchise is let, I hope that we will see better services for my constituents in Faversham and Mid Kent.

I note that one part of the ITT is that there will no longer be a first class, in order to provide more space in trains and better travelling conditions. But constituents of mine with disabilities have told me that they use first class to make sure that they have a seat. What steps will my hon. Friend take to make sure that in future people with disabilities will be able to get a seat on busy trains?

Paul Maynard: That is a valuable point, although personally I do not believe that travellers should have to buy first-class tickets in order to be seated suitably. All train operating companies have an obligation to treat disabled passengers as fairly as possible, and I will reflect on how we can ensure that the aspect that my hon. Friend has identified is considered in the context of future franchises.

Eye Tests: Drivers

10. **David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP):** If he will make it his policy to use electronic motorway signage to encourage drivers to have their eyes tested. [902664]

The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes): Highways England is responsible for operating motorways and major A roads in England. It uses electronic variable message signs primarily to advise drivers of immediate safety issues and to provide journey information for road users. The country has a very good safety record, but improvements can always be made, and drivers can do their bit by regularly ensuring that their eyes are tested and that they are fit to drive.

David Linden: I wish you and all hon. Members a very happy St Andrew's day, Mr Speaker.

Last week, which was road safety week, we had the pleasure of hosting Vision Express and the charity Brake at the House. They explained to Members how important it is to have their eyes tested, which 1.5 million car users have not done. Will the Minister follow the example of the Scottish Government, who ran an electronic motor signage pilot last week, to ensure that road conditions are safer?

Mr Hayes: We could do something very practical: we could get the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to remind drivers of the importance of good eyesight in the letter that it sends to them when their licences are renewed. We will certainly be doing that. As for the issue of road signage, too much signage poses a risk: evidence from Highways England, which consulted road users, suggests that the more of it there is, the less notice people take of it. We need to be careful about just how much signage we put on our roads, and to concentrate on the vital messages that are central to safety and good advice.

Passenger Trends

11. **Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made of trends in rail passenger usage. [902666]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): The latest statistics published by the Office of Rail and Road for the first quarter of 2017-18 show a slight decline in the number of rail journeys, although passenger kilometres and revenue have increased since the previous year.

Dan Carden: Since 2010, rail fares have risen by 27%, at twice the rate of wages, and the steepest fare hikes for five years are due in January. Meanwhile, passenger numbers are declining, and more and more of my constituents are being priced out of rail travel altogether. When will the Government accept that the whole system of rail franchising and private profiteering from our railways is utterly broken?

Paul Maynard: Opposition Members really should not try to draw conclusions from one quarter's statistics to underpin their own ideological agenda. The simple fact is that far more passengers have been using our rail networks than ever before. I believe that privatised

railways have been a success. The alternative that the hon. Gentleman has proposed would ensure that passengers were always at the back of the queue whenever any decision was made by any ghastly future Labour Government.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): More passengers are using the great western main line than ever before, but we need more investment in that line to ensure that journeys are fast and resilient. If our journeys are to continue to be slow, however, will the Minister commit himself to extending the GSM-R mobile phone trial that is taking place in Scotland and the north of England to Devon and Cornwall?

Paul Maynard: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to growing demand for journeys to the south-west. I believe that Great Western is doing a very good job at running the franchise. We are very supportive of the work of the Peninsula Rail Task Force, and we are trying to pull together all the work that is being done to ensure that we have a clear idea of what more we can do. I will certainly consider the hon. Gentleman's idea carefully.

Main Line Services: Kettering

12. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): If he will include half-hourly main line train services north from Kettering in the next midland main line franchise. [902667]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): As my hon. Friend will know from yesterday's statement, there are currently two trains per hour between Kettering and Nottingham serving the evening peak, and one train per hour during the rest of the day. Our proposal for the next east midlands franchise is for a minimum of one train per hour between Kettering and Nottingham throughout the day, but no firm decision has been made yet. I will listen carefully to my hon. Friend's further representations.

Mr Hollobone: On any objective analysis, the superb submission to the east midlands franchise consultation by the Kettering rail users group must be one of the best that the Minister's office has received. May I invite him to reread the submission in even greater detail, given that it contains an overwhelmingly compelling case for Kettering to be the optimum connectivity hub in the new east midlands franchise?

Paul Maynard: I happily pay tribute to the work of the Kettering rail users association; I always find that the views of those who use our rail network are a source of great wisdom. As my hon. Friend knows, we have had the biggest upgrade on the midland main line since 1870, with the creation of a sixth path. We are keen to maintain as many northbound opportunities as possible from Kettering, and I will review that submission in greater detail.

Road Safety

13. **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve safety for cyclists, pedestrians and motorists. [902668]

The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes): The British road safety statement, published in December 2015, sets out the Government's priorities for action, including measures to help vulnerable groups to stay safe on roads, extra money to crack down on drug-affected drivers, and tougher penalties for using mobile phones while driving.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Is the Minister of State aware that the King's Lynn guide dogs forum is campaigning hard to highlight the impact of selfish pavement parking on blind and visually impaired people? It also recently took me on a blindfolded walk through the centre of King's Lynn, which brought home to me the scale of this problem, and I highly recommend that the Minister of State and Secretary of State do such a blindfolded walk with the guide dogs organisations in their constituencies.

Mr Hayes: I went on such a walk a few weeks ago in Spalding town centre, and I recommend it to hon. Members; I know many will have done it. It gives an entirely different insight into the struggle that people have getting around town centres when others have inconsiderately parked and there are many obstacles in their way. It also gives a real understanding of how wonderful our guide dogs are. It is important that the Government do their bit. Of course the charitable sector does an immense amount, too. I certainly take my hon. Friend's remarks seriously. We will look closely at what more can be done, but he can be absolutely certain that I and my colleagues in the Department will be champions of the interests of people who are visually impaired and use guide dogs.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Minister will know that one of the biggest obstacles to the take-up of cycling is people's fears about safety. Has he done an assessment of whether the necessary resources are in place to implement the cycling, walking and investment strategy, and if he has, could he publish it?

Mr Hayes: As the hon. Gentleman implies, we do have such a strategy. He is also right that cyclists need the same kind of attention that I mentioned in my previous answer. They can be put into hazardous circumstances by a range of different obstacles that they encounter as they go about their business. The Government are strongly committed to cycling, as I think he knows, but he is right that we must look closely at the hazards cyclists face, and that will be included in the strategy.

A417 Air Balloon Roundabout

14. **Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (The Cotswolds) (Con): What progress has been made on the A417 Air Balloon roundabout missing link upgrade. [902669]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): My hon. Friend knows well the interest I have taken in this project. Highways England is currently conducting a final review of the route options for the A417 missing link. It is on track to launch a public consultation early in the new year.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My right hon. Friend knows that the south-west is a low-growth area. This is a highly important strategic national road scheme linking the south-west with the midlands and the Thames corridor. Does he agree that we need to get on and build this scheme as soon as possible?

Chris Grayling: It is not just about that; we also know that this is a highly dangerous piece of road, where, tragically, there has been a further accident with loss of life in the past few weeks. So it is not just about creating the right economic links; it is also about creating a safer road network. For both those reasons I have been very clear with Highways England that I want to get on with this project.

Electric Vehicles: Scotland

18. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the uptake of electric vehicles. [902674]

The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes): I have ongoing discussions with the Scottish Government, as well as all the devolved Administrations, about the uptake of electric vehicles, and the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill—which I recommend very strongly to the hon. Gentleman—is progressing through Parliament. There is also strong engagement at an official level through the Office for Low Emission Vehicles with all devolved Administrations.

Stuart C. McDonald: I thank the Minister for that answer. The Scottish Government aim to establish one of the most comprehensive charging networks in Europe, so we welcome the announcement of £400 million for electric charge points as part of the industrial strategy, but can the Minister confirm what the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy said on the industrial strategy on Monday: that that £400 million will be allocated on a localised needs-based approach and not just one based on population?

Mr Hayes: That is a good point. This was considered closely in Committee, and, as the hon. Gentleman will know, the provisions of the Bill allow for the development of more charge points, supported by the announcement of £300 million in the autumn Budget—£200 million for infrastructure and £100 million for the plug-in car grant. However, he is right to suggest that we need to be mindful of the effect in rural areas. I do not want us to end up with certain areas covered by good infrastructure but it being absent elsewhere. I said in Committee, and I repeat here in the House, that we will look at further measures to ensure the even spread of the infrastructure.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): More and more people in East Renfrewshire are looking to purchase electric vehicles, but they are put off by the lack of charging points. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that charging point infrastructure is consistent right across the UK?

Mr Hayes: There are a number of ways in which we can do that. I have spoken about major retailers, and there are provisions relating to them in the Bill. That

will tend to mean that charge points are clustered around major arterial routes, but the good news is that I am working closely with colleagues to make sure that local authorities ensure that there are on-street charging points. I am open to other suggestions about how we might ensure that charge points are spread across the country, and I invite such suggestions from Members right across the House as the Bill makes its progress through Parliament.

Driving Tests

20. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with (a) the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency and (b) the Public and Commercial Services union on new components of the driving test to be introduced on 4 December 2017. [902677]

The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes): Me again! It is almost too much of a good thing, isn't it? But you can never have too much; you know that, Mr Speaker.

The Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency has agreed proposals to reform the practical car driving test in April. It has maintained a dialogue with the Public and Commercial Services union about the components of the new driving test throughout the development of the proposals between 2015 and the present day.

Martyn Day: What plans does the Minister have to meet the workers and unions in the DVSA before 4 December, when more than 2,000 staff will be taking strike action over concerns about the new test? What assurance can he give me that the safety issues in question will be addressed before the test is rolled out?

Mr Hayes: Proust said that a

“powerful idea communicates some of its strength to him who challenges it”,

and I hope that the power of my idea will have some resonance with the hon. Gentleman. The truth is that these changes are supported by the driver training and road safety representatives who helped us to develop and trial them. More than 4,500 learner drivers and 860 driving instructors took part in research at 32 locations across Britain. At no stage has anyone said that the changes will not be beneficial, not least among those who took part in that process. We need to press on with the changes, because they will clearly be beneficial, and I hope that the power of that argument has been communicated to the hon. Gentleman.

Topical Questions

T1. [902680] **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): In the case of the Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), I am sure that we have not had too much of a good thing, Mr Speaker. You will be delighted to know that it is not only the House that has heard extensively from him this week but 175 Ministers from around the world. We have

been hosting the biennial meeting of the International Maritime Organisation general assembly in London. The IMO is the specialist United Nations organisation responsible for measures to improve the safety and security of international shipping and to prevent pollution from ships. We host the IMO here in London. I want to thank everyone who has been involved in organising that event and to extend a warm welcome on behalf of the United Kingdom Government to all the Ministers and other delegates who have attended the convention this week.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that all those Ministers from around the world feel both informed and improved as a result of their interaction with the Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings.

Craig Tracey: I warmly welcome last week's announcement of an £8 million road safety fund for the areas of Warwickshire affected by HS2. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Trinity Road-Overwoods Road junction in my constituency, which has seen numerous fatalities and serious accidents, would be an excellent candidate for some of that funding, given that the proposed solution is now unlikely to go ahead owing to the development of HS2?

Chris Grayling: I am glad that the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), who is responsible for HS2, was able to visit that junction last week with my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey). I am also pleased that Warwickshire County Council has been such a beneficiary of the available funding. While it will be for the council to decide what schemes to support, I hope that it will focus on where it can make the biggest difference to safety.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): This Government are presiding over a sustained fall in the number of bus journeys taken. Just this week, Kent County Council outlined plans to axe more than 70 bus routes in a bid to save £4 million. Does the Secretary of State accept that bus passenger numbers will continue to fall until his Government halt the cuts to local authorities?

Chris Grayling: We want bus passenger numbers to rise, and the measures in the Bus Services Act 2017, which passed through the House a few months ago, will provide an environment in which bus ridership can recover and improve and will lead to more and better services around the country.

T5. [902684] **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What assurances can Ministers give to help taxi drivers who buy the new electric taxi before the vehicle excise duty change comes into force?

The Minister for Transport Legislation and Maritime (Mr John Hayes): My hon. Friend is right that that matters to taxi drivers. A legal change is required to allow the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to identify electric taxis as separate from cars and vans in order to apply the exemption. I wrote to the Exchequer Secretary

to the Treasury—I emphasise for the record that he is my former PPS—on 25 October, and I am meeting him on 12 December to discuss exactly the issue my hon. Friend raises.

T2. [902681] **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Train services in Manchester and the north are poor, but prices keep going up and up. A constituent sent me a photo showing delays on all but one of 18 trains between 8 am and 9 am from Levenshulme in my constituency. Appallingly, the stations does not have disabled access either. Will the Minister take steps to improve the situation so that my constituents can get to work?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): We are always keen to work with our Labour friends with whom we co-manage Rail North and Transport for the North. I recognise the importance of step-free access in Greater Manchester, and I will look at the station to which the hon. Gentleman refers to see what we can do.

T6. [902685] **Sir Nicholas Soames** (Mid Sussex) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement yesterday, which will be broadly welcomed? I much admire his gumption in sticking to his guns on an important matter. Does he agree that the service for my constituents on the East Grinstead line continues to fall well short of satisfactory? Is he aware that that is often due to the fact that train crew do not turn up? Does he agree that that is a failure of leadership and management and will he tell the company to smarten itself up?

Chris Grayling: I will happily do that. Staffing issues are always disappointing, but the other area of challenge on the Southern network has been the condition of the infrastructure. We will in the coming months be taking some major steps with some major projects to start to improve the quality of that infrastructure, including spending the £300 million we have already committed, with more to follow in the next control period.

T3. [902682] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Transport for London transformed the dilapidated Silverlink north London line, changing it from two-car trains twice an hour to the renewed London Overground with five-car trains every 10 minutes. My constituents want to know when the delays at the decrepit Acton Main Line and West Ealing stations will finish and when TfL Crossrail will take over. First Group seems to have forgotten how to run small stations.

Chris Grayling: Crossrail is of course a massive investment in transport in London. It is not a TfL project; it is a joint project between my Department and TfL that is designed to improve the lot of passengers both inside and outside London. It will make a real difference to the south-east.

T7. [902686] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): The central forecast of the Office for National Statistics is that the population will hit 70 million by 2029—just 12 years' time—which is up by 5 million from today and represents an increase of 8%. What is the Department's estimate of growth in the number of vehicles over that same 12-year period? Given that our superb roads

Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), is enthusiastic about the design of our road network, how will his enthusiasm help to meet that challenge?

Mr John Hayes: There are three things I can say immediately: the record road investment programme will help; the development of vehicle technology will change the use of cars—we talk about autonomous vehicles in many ways, but one effect they may have is to change our sense of car ownership by encouraging more sharing of cars; and, as my hon. Friend rightly says, we need to think about transport infrastructure in connection with other development, such as economic development, housing development, et cetera. The question he asks is so profound that it cannot be answered in a few moments here, so I invite him to the Department to sit down with officials and have a serious discussion about this important matter.

T4. [902683] **Jo Swinson** (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): In July a three-year-old boy experienced a life-threatening allergic reaction on a plane when fellow passengers started eating the nuts they had been served. Thankfully he survived, but I know from personal experience how terrifying it is to go into anaphylactic shock, and the last place a person would want that to happen is 30,000 feet in the air when they are hours from formal medical attention. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me and a group of campaigners to explore solutions that would enable the 2% of the population who have a nut allergy to fly with confidence?

Chris Grayling: I understand why this is such a serious issue, and I would be delighted to extend an invitation to the hon. Lady to come to the Department to meet Ministers and officials to talk about what is clearly an important matter.

T9. [902688] **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): Along with many other Londoners, my constituents are concerned about the number of promises the Mayor appears to be breaking on transport infrastructure. Will my right hon. Friend confirm exactly what the Mayor now needs to do to progress Crossrail 2 so it does not become another one of his broken promises?

Chris Grayling: We are now conducting the kind of review of the financing of Crossrail 2 that we conducted on Crossrail 1—the Montague report. I am keen to see the project progress in lock step and parallel with northern powerhouse rail, and I make it clear that they are both important projects. I also make it clear that the London contribution cannot be an IOU paid for by the Government. We have to make sure that we have a robust, absolutely reliable funding package so this project can go ahead in good shape.

T8. [902687] **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): Bradford and the whole Yorkshire region have been locked in a dispute with the Department for Communities and Local Government over Yorkshire devolution, meaning that we will have to compete for limited funding from the transforming cities fund, rather than being entitled to it like areas with elected Mayors, because of DCLG's

stubbornness. Will the Minister therefore speak to colleagues in DCLG to help to break this deadlock and unlock the transport funding the region desperately needs?

Chris Grayling: I am obviously well aware of that issue. It is worth remembering that we have just allocated £175 million to Leeds, which will be spent on a variety of projects around the city, but I am also aware that funding needs to flow to West Yorkshire. I will personally make sure that, as we allocate the funding, West Yorkshire is not left out.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State welcome the fourth season of the Formula E series? The series starts in Hong Kong this Sunday and will be broadcast on Channel 5, and it aims to advance electric vehicle technology. With races taking place in 11 cities such as Paris and New York, will he look at attracting future races to the UK to complement our rapidly increasing electric vehicle technology?

Chris Grayling: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Motor racing is a great success story for this country, and it is an important part of our economy. People often do not understand the importance of the industry, which is particularly centred on Silverstone in Northamptonshire, where many of the leading teams are based. The technologies that come from small businesses and suppliers change the automotive world, not just in motor racing but across the piece. I am delighted to see the success of Formula E, and I would like to see more Formula E and more development of technologies for it in the UK. I am happy to extend the Government's support to the motor racing industry.

T10. [902689] **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): South Western Railway plans to reduce the number of trains going through Queenstown Road station in my constituency from seven trains an hour to just four. Given the increased number of residents and commuters, and given that the station is on one of the busiest lines, will the Secretary of State commit to looking again at this ill-thought-out policy?

Paul Maynard: I am grateful for the question. As the hon. Lady will know, we are having a consultation at the moment, through South Western Railway, listening carefully to what passengers want. We take all submissions seriously, so we will listen carefully to what passengers say in this consultation and respond in due course. I have heard her point.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Will the Secretary of State keep in mind the other northern powerhouse, Aberdeen, and the economic importance of its airport, including in servicing the oil and gas industry?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend and I had a productive visit to Aberdeen airport recently, and I absolutely understand its importance to the whole economy of the north-east of Scotland and indeed to the United Kingdom, because Aberdeen is central to one of our key industries. I have made it clear that as we expand Heathrow airport, we will make sure that capacity is set aside for regional links to airports in Scotland and elsewhere, so that every part of the UK benefits from the expansion of that airport.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): TfL has clearly demonstrated its ability to run efficient services and improve them in London, so will the Secretary of State enter into negotiations with the Mayor of London about south eastern suburban services before my constituents are forced to endure yet another bungled privatisation?

Chris Grayling: The first thing to remind the hon. Gentleman of is that London Overground is also a franchise—Labour always conveniently forgets that. It is run by Arriva. The other thing to say is that the document we published yesterday on the new south eastern franchise involves far greater additional benefits for passengers than was ever the case in the Mayor's business plan for that franchise. The last point to make is that I have extended to TfL and the Mayor the same offer that I made and is now in force in the north for a partnership in operating, designing and managing the franchise, but that offer is yet to be accepted.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Cheshire East has the highest gross value added in the north. My constituents are extremely grateful for the Middlewich bypass funding, which is key to continuing this economic growth and delivering even more, as is the need to improve junction 17 of the M6 nearby. Will Ministers kindly give consideration to including that as part of the north's emerging strategic transport plan?

Chris Grayling: I absolutely hear what my hon. Friend says. As someone who used to live close to that area, I understand the issues she raised, and I am sure Transport for the North will listen to her comments today. It is finalising its plans. As Cheshire and mid-Cheshire grow—the towns there have expanded considerably in recent years—there is a need to make sure that the infrastructure is fit for purpose, which is why my earlier comments about the mid-Cheshire line are also important.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I welcome the public funding for the Tyne and Wear Metro announced in the Budget, which will come through the northern powerhouse. But if the northern powerhouse is to be anything more than a marketing gimmick, such funding must be part of an overall commitment to redress the dire imbalance in transport funding between the north and the south of England. Will the Secretary of State make that commitment here and now?

Chris Grayling: I keep saying that we are actually doing things right across the north: what we are doing on the Tyne and Wear Metro; the improvements to the A1; the completion of that last motorway link; the works taking place on the M1, M6 and M62; and the A66 widening. There are projects happening all across the north. We have brand new trains arriving on the east coast main line, the upgrade of that line that lies ahead and northern powerhouse rail in the future. This Government are delivering better transport for the north of England.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Following the announcement by the Secretary of State yesterday that he will explore opportunities to restore capacity lost under the Beeching reforms in the 1960s, will he commit to looking into the possibility of reopening Aldridge station and perhaps coming to visit me in Aldridge to examine the benefits that could bring?

Paul Maynard: My hon. Friend is right to identify that project as one worth considering, and I was discussing it only this morning with the Mayor of the west midlands, Andy Street. I am more than happy to have further conversations with my hon. Friend on that matter.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Yesterday, I met people from nextbike, who run an excellent cycle hire scheme in Glasgow, which I often use to get to my surgeries. Does the Minister have any plans to regulate public cycle hire schemes, so that the public can be assured of their safety?

Mr John Hayes: Public hire schemes are an important part of extending provision and making cycling more widely available. As the hon. Lady will know, different schemes apply in different localities. Clearly, I am always happy to have discussions with her about this, but there are no imminent plans to make the changes that she describes.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Residents and businesses in Rugeley face real issues as a result of HGV fly parking. Will the Minister update the House on any measures that are being taken to improve and increase HGV parking facilities?

Mr Hayes: This scheme is a subject very dear to my heart, and my hon. Friend has raised it previously in the House. She is absolutely right that the inappropriate parking of HGVs is a menace. We are trialling a “clamp first” policy in Kent. The preponderance of people who park most irresponsibly are not drivers from the United Kingdom; it is therefore difficult for local authorities to pursue them in the way that one would expect. We will look at the results of that trial and we will go further. I am determined to stop the irresponsible parking of HGVs, which causes such nuisance.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State feel any guilt about the fact that many of my constituents and many people in this country thought during the referendum campaign that people like him were promising that more money would be spent on transport infrastructure and the NHS because we would save so much money from leaving the EU? Yesterday's announcement of a £50 billion debt that we have to pay to the EU was a shocking revelation. What is he going to do about it?

Chris Grayling: First, we made no announcement yesterday about money for the EU. Secondly, we are spending more money on transport infrastructure.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Montrose port is vital to Angus's local economy, and good transport links to and from the port are essential for it to flourish further. Will the Secretary of State tell me what communications he has had with Network Rail since his visit to Montrose, regarding progress on negotiations to open a direct link to Montrose port?

Mr John Hayes: I have exciting news for my hon. Friend because, as she may not know, I have initiated a full connectivity study. It is absolutely right that as we invest in our ports we look at the rail and road links to them, too. The study will be published early next year.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Further to my earlier question to the Secretary of State about Crossrail for the north, will he confirm that Crossrail 2 will not be wholly electrified?

Chris Grayling: We have finished the design of neither Crossrail 2 nor northern powerhouse rail. My focus right now is on the projects that are under way, including electrification across parts of the north of England and a £3 billion upgrade to the trans-Pennine routes. We are already seeing better investment in the north. When we see the final shape of Crossrail 2 and northern powerhouse rail, we will see what the answer to the hon. Lady's question is.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will take the point of order as I understand it flows from questions, but it had better be a genuine point of order and it had better be extremely brief.

Andy McDonald: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker. I seek your clarification. Not an hour ago, I raised the question of the £2 billion that was due from Stagecoach to the Treasury. The Secretary of State said yesterday:

“let us be absolutely clear for the House that as we bring the east coast franchise to a close and move to the new arrangements, no one will get any bail-out”.—[*Official Report*, 29 November 2017; Vol. 632, c. 344.]

He clarified that by also saying that every franchise makes a parent-company commitment before taking out a contract and will be held to that commitment, to be paid in full. That is £232 million—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must resume his seat. I am extremely grateful to him for his attempted point of order, but it is not a matter for the Chair.

Andy McDonald *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is not a matter for the Chair. If he wishes to, the Secretary of State can respond, briefly. The truth is that the hon. Gentleman is dissatisfied with the position that the Government have taken. If he wishes to explore the matter further, which of course he can and, I dare say, will do, he can do so through questions, the use of the Order Paper or further debates, but he cannot do it any further now.

There is substantial pressure on time today, as a study of the Order Paper will demonstrate, but I thought the House would want urgently to express support for the victims of racism and bigotry and to denounce their purveyors.

Online Hate Speech

10.38 am

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary if she will make a statement on the activities of Britain First, online hate speech and the sharing of inflammatory content online by the President of the United States, Donald Trump.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Britain First is an extremist organisation that seeks to divide communities through its use of hateful narratives that spread lies and stoke tensions. The deputy leader of Britain First is subject to a pending criminal trial, accused of religiously aggravated harassment over the alleged distribution of leaflets and the posting of online material.

British people overwhelmingly reject the prejudiced rhetoric of the far right, which is the antithesis of the values that this country represents: decency, tolerance and respect. We will stand with them in doing so. That is why we launched our counter-extremism strategy in 2015 and our hate crime action plan just last year. This House should be clear that this Government will not tolerate any groups that spread hate by demonising those of other faiths or ethnicities and that deliberately raise community fears and tensions.

We have been clear: President Donald Trump was wrong to retweet videos hosted by the far right group, Britain First. When we look at the wider picture, the relationship between the UK and America, I know how valuable the friendship is between our two nations. As Home Secretary, I can tell the House that the importance of the relationship between our countries—the unparalleled sharing of intelligence between our countries—is vital. It has undoubtedly saved British lives. That is the bigger picture here and I urge people to remember that.

Stephen Doughty: Mr Speaker, you will recall that the last time I raised related matters with you before yesterday was when Members from across the House expressed their clear view to you that, after his racist and sexist behaviour, President Trump should not be afforded the honour of addressing both Houses of Parliament in Westminster Hall.

I thank the Home Secretary for her answer and the strength of her words, the Prime Minister for her comments, and the others who have spoken out over the past 24 hours. The extraordinary events we have seen undoubtedly underline why Members from across this House were right to make that call about the President not coming here and why the Prime Minister's premature offer of a state visit should not now go ahead.

Let me be clear: I condemn the original content of the messages shared as abhorrent. Anybody who purveys hatred or violence online or in person, whether that be the fascist far right, those who falsely claim to be acting in the name of Islam, or anti-Semites, should rightly be exposed and dealt with.

Let us also be clear: this is the President of the United States sharing with millions inflammatory and divisive content deliberately posted to sow hatred and division by, as the Home Secretary says, a convicted criminal who is facing further charges and who represents

a vile fascist organisation seeking to spread hatred and violence in person and online. By sharing it, he is racist, incompetent or unthinking—or all three.

Will the Home Secretary please explain what the Government are doing to crack down on the activities, including those online, of Britain First and other far right organisations, and explain why Britain First has not yet been proscribed in the way that National Action has been?

Given the extraordinary events of the past 24 hours and the direct attack by the President on the Prime Minister for rightly condemning his actions, can the Home Secretary confirm whether the President and the Prime Minister have spoken? Has the Foreign Secretary who, just days ago, heaped praise on the President's statements on Twitter, saying that people related to them, summoned the US ambassador to express his concerns? Will she also advise whether President Trump's actions and implied endorsement could have any prejudicial impact on the criminal proceedings currently under way against Ms Fransen? Is the Home Secretary aware that Ms Fransen posted a video last night online, personally urging the President to

“help keep her out of prison.”?

Finally, will the Home Secretary confirm when she and the Government will take tough action, on which I support her in her efforts, on the social media companies? We have had no response from Twitter, a typically irresponsible attitude.

Let me conclude by emphasising that I love America and Americans. My true grandfather was an American GI who came to this country in 1944 to help us fight the dark forces of fascism. I have travelled the length and breadth of 25 of the United States, and it is a country and a people of extraordinary generosity, courage, kindness and humanity. But this President represents none of those things. In one of his last speeches as President, the great Republican General, protector of America at a time of great peril and friend of Britain, Dwight D. Eisenhower, said:

“Down the long lane of history, yet to be written, America knows that this world of ours, ever growing smaller must avoid becoming a community of dreadful fear and hate, and be, instead, a proud confederation of mutual trust and respect.”

As we stand in the shadow of the words of our fallen colleague, Jo Cox, I sincerely hope that her words, that we have more in common, and the words of Dwight D. Eisenhower, will be heeded in these dangerous times. We must always take a stand against hatred from wherever it comes, otherwise we will slip into the darkness.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before I ask the Home Secretary to respond, and on the basis of sound professional procedural advice, I ought to say to the House that Jayda Fransen, as just referenced by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), is awaiting trial on, I believe, 14 December. I hope that Members will be conscious, while giving vent to their views, as they should and will do, of the importance of avoiding comments that could be prejudicial to the proper conduct of the criminal proceedings. I thank the hon. Gentleman.

Amber Rudd: Mr Speaker, thank you for your guidance regarding the criminal case. I hope the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) will understand if I do not reply to that particular element for the reasons you have set out, Mr Speaker.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words, and I share his views about America. I also love that country, having worked there for a year, and as I said in my opening answer, I am in awe of the mutual trust between us and the Americans, the effort they make to work with us, our shared values with the American people and the way their work has been so important in helping us on intelligence matters—it has undoubtedly saved British lives.

The hon. Gentleman asks what we have done about online social media extremism of various sorts. We have taken it extremely seriously, which is why I proscribed National Action, the first far-right group to be so proscribed as a terrorist organisation. He asks about other organisations to be proscribed. We are very careful in identifying what merits proscription. He may have a different view, but we abide by the letter of the law in being very clear where members or activists embark on actions that are or are not legal. We have to draw that line very carefully. We have therefore proscribed National Action and will always keep under review what other organisations may be proscribed.

The hon. Gentleman asks what else we are doing with online companies to ensure that the internet is free from dangerous material, and he will no doubt know that the UK has been leading in this area. The Prime Minister has called for more action. In the wake of the terrorist attacks this year, we called for a global internet forum for counter-terrorism, and I went myself to San Francisco for its launch in the summer. The internet companies are also taking action. Twitter now takes down 95% of illegal material with artificial intelligence. That it is now engaging in machine learning to take down this hate is an incredibly important investment and breakthrough in ensuring that more is taken down, but we are not complacent—more needs to be done—and we will always make sure that we provide the vital leadership necessary to ensure it is taken down.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asks about the Prime Minister and whether she has spoken to the President. I will simply say that the Prime Minister will always have regular calls with the President. She has been explicit in criticising this tweet, however, and I know that she will always call it out where she sees it, which is what she has done here.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The retweet has been condemned. We can concentrate on the wrong done by the original tweet. Can we ask the Home Secretary if we can do right by identifying, isolating, putting down and putting out the intended community, religious and ethnic strains?

Amber Rudd: It is essential that we have a fair approach to all types of extremism, and with a view to that we always make sure that far-right extremism is treated just as harshly, as it should be, as any sort of radical Islamic terrorism. It is interesting to observe that 25% of referrals to the Channel programme—the bespoke programme that follows Prevent referrals—are in fact on the far-right side.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The Home Secretary will appreciate that the Labour party believes that the United States is our most important ally. We anticipate that any British Government would want to work closely with the United States on issues of mutual concern, and we bow to no one in our affection and respect for the American people, but on the question of the online activities of the 45th President, does she accept that the fact that he chose to retweet material from Britain First is offensive not just to British people of Muslim heritage and British people of black and minority ethnic heritage, but to all decent British people. It is also an attack on the values of this country. Although the Labour party appreciates the importance of *realpolitik*, we also call on the Government to make it clear that, in no way and at no time, do they give any support whatever to the distasteful views of the 45th President on race, migration and Muslim communities internationally. To do anything else would be an affront to voters in this country, whichever side of the House they support.

Amber Rudd: I thank the right hon. Lady for her powerful response. I think it is fair to say that we have been very clear. President Donald Trump was wrong to retweet videos posted by the far-right group Britain First. We have said so clearly in this House and the Prime Minister has said so clearly online. We will continue to speak freely and frankly when such activity takes place.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I think that the whole House will agree with the Prime Minister's words. One of the advantages of having such a special relationship with the United States is that when a friend tells us we have done something dreadfully wrong, we tend to listen. Would not the world be a better place if the Prime Minister could persuade the President of the United States to delete his Twitter account?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is true that we all listen more carefully to criticism from our friends than from people with whom we do not have a relationship. I hope that the Prime Minister's comments will have some impact on the President. It is interesting to note my hon. Friend's advice regarding Twitter accounts; I am sure that many of us share his view.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The Scottish National party has long taken the view that the current President of the United States should not be afforded a state visit to the United Kingdom, and yesterday's actions have reinforced that absolutely. We respect the office of the President of the United States, which is a fantastic country and ally. However, the sharing of tweets by an extremist, offensive and racist organisation is not fitting of someone holding such high office and must be condemned unequivocally. We welcome Downing Street's suggestion that the tweets were wrong, but we call for the Government to go further because it is not one of the key dangers of a state visit that we have absolutely no idea what the President will say or tweet next and before he visits? What does he actually need to say or tweet before the idea of a state visit is ditched once and for all?

Amber Rudd: An invitation for the visit has been extended and accepted, but the dates and the precise arrangements have yet to be agreed.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): Local authorities have a key role in combating extremism. Can the Home Secretary say exactly what the Government plan to do further to support local authorities to ensure that they can undertake this role?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that local authorities have an important role to play. We actively engage with them through the Prevent programme, which allows us to support community organisations that are embedded in the local area. Those organisations can go out and engage with local groups, providing the support to safeguard people, particularly young men and women who may be becoming radicalised. It is an incredibly important part of the way in which we look after our communities, and we will continue to do so.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): We agree about the importance of our relationship with the US, and our peoples have stood together against far-right extremism and Islamist extremism and will do so again. That is exactly why we cannot pander now. Britain First gets its succour from spreading its poison and its extremism online—that is how it works—and the President of the United States has just given it a rocket boost in promoting hatred in our communities. Online is where the new battle for democracy is being fought, and the Prime Minister has rightly challenged Putin's Russia for what she described as

“seeking to weaponise information...to plant fake stories...in an attempt to sow discord”.

That means that—no matter what diplomatic route we find to do this—we cannot simply roll out a red carpet and give the President of the United States a platform to also sow discord in our communities. We know that he and these groups will keep doing this and keep spreading extremism. We also know—from the plaque behind us and from our own history—where the spread of extremism leads unless enough of us are prepared to stand up now and say no.

Amber Rudd: We do stand up to extremism; we stand up to it in our own communities. We stand up to it as the Prime Minister did when she criticised the President for doing the retweeting that we are discussing today.

The right hon. Lady is absolutely right about trying to clean up the online community. That is where so much of the battle takes place, which is why the Government are focused on making sure we take these things down. That is also why our relationship with the US is so important. When I called for a roundtable of the internet giants after the first terrorist attack, in March, what we got was the UK representatives coming. It was only with the support of the US that we were able to get the Global Internet Forum set up, which is based in San Francisco. Being able to work at the highest levels with our US friends to get action taken is the best way to achieve such outcomes, and I urge the right hon. Lady to bear that in mind.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): About a month ago, the most popular man in the world was a last-day employee of Twitter who unplugged the account of the President of the United States. Was he

not right? If Twitter is genuine in its commitment to fight hate crime online, it should have no hesitation in taking down the Twitter account of the first citizen of the US, as it would that of any other citizen of the world who peddled such hate crime.

Amber Rudd: I am sure that the chief executive of Twitter will have heard the interesting suggestion from my hon. Friend, and we will leave it to Twitter to decide what action to take.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): It is pretty clear, on the basis of what we already know about this fascist President, that mere words are not enough. Action is needed. Three times the Home Secretary has been asked by Opposition Members to cancel the state visit. Action is needed now, not a slap on the wrist. Cancel the state visit.

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his views, and I can only repeat what I have said before—that the invitation has been extended and accepted, and we have yet to make the arrangements.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Is it not an irony that the President of the United States, who loves Twitter and talks about fake news, actually retweeted fake news? However, the real danger is that the vast majority of our constituents have never heard of Britain First, and this retweet has given it huge oxygen. Should we not all go back to our constituencies and our communities and say that, no matter what people's faith is and no matter what their beliefs are, we are together as a community, and the President was stupid in what he did?

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend, and he raises such an important point, which is that we need to reassure our communities that the sort of hate that is promoted by Britain First is alien to us. If we look at the response to not only the tragic, tragic death of Jo Cox but the terrorist attacks this year, what we actually saw was our communities coming together and refusing to be divided, and we should make sure that we show that to be the case around our own neighbourhoods as well as across the Benches of the House.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): How would the Home Secretary respond if similar tweets to those made by President Trump were made by a Muslim leader promoting hatred? Would they be allowed into the UK?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman should not rush to that conclusion. As I hope he has heard, I have been clear that we take an even-handed approach to individuals and to extremism of any sort, which is why I took the time to point out that right-wing extremism of the sort we have seen retweeted and the sort we have seen from National Action, which meant that we proscribed it, is just as hateful and just as dangerous as any sort of radical Islamic extremism.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend and the Prime Minister on their strong words and strong action in condemning the spreading of these evil words. Will my right hon. Friend

[*Bob Blackman*]

look at encouraging the internet companies to make sure that Twitter and Facebook accounts, and other such accounts, are clearly identified as the mouthpiece of individuals and the organisations they represent? There is a risk that people think this is a general view of British people, and it clearly is not. We need to isolate these people for what they are.

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend raises the very good point, which was also raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), that we must be careful not to allow all this conversation about a hated, hate-filled group to fuel interest in the group. We want to make sure it does not represent Britain, does not represent our values, and should not in any way be interpreted as doing so. I think it is an interesting point, and one we should all act on.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Hate breeds hate, and an attack on the Muslim community is an attack on us all. Not content with attacking minorities in the United States, Donald Trump, by giving a platform to Britain First, a rabidly racist and neo-fascist organisation, is now actively sowing seeds of hatred in our country. At a time when the number of hate crimes in our country is increasing, what action will the Home Secretary take today to mitigate the horrific actions that the President took yesterday?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady knows, I think, that we take all forms of hate crime very seriously. We always encourage communities to report it when it takes place. I have active engagement with the police and crime commissioners and the chiefs of police to ensure that reporting does take place. Critically, we have a role to make sure that online companies do more to take material down, ensure that reports of fake news are not posted and help us identify who has been promoting hateful information. So we as a Government are on the front foot, ensuring that we engage with the online companies, show the leadership that is expected and make sure such material is taken down.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): We all condemn and feel disgusted by the hate speech that has been propagated by Mr Trump and others. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the danger with organisations like Britain First is that they conceal their hateful activities behind a cloak of fluffiness? They sometimes talk about Remembrance Day in a very insidious way, to trick people—I am not suggesting that in relation to Donald Trump; he ought to have known better. Those are the tactics they use. What is my right hon. Friend doing, with the Government, to develop her understanding so that we can fight hate crime on all the fronts that infect our communities so dangerously?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend raises an important point. She is absolutely right that sometimes extremist far right groups try to hijack our national symbols and our national days of memorial and remembrance. We need to make sure that we always call that out. I would say to my hon. Friend, the best thing we can do is call it out, and make sure that we spread the alternative word—the alternative story—about British values.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Two million people signed a petition of outrage when the President was given an honour that has never been offered to any other President, when he was invited to make a red-carpet visit to this country in the first month of his office. Since then, he has dangerously increased tension in every frozen world conflict that he has addressed. He has disgraced himself again and again, and he worries us because his impulsive finger is on the nuclear button. If he is allowed to come to this country now, he should be treated as anyone else who breaks the law, and charged with inciting racial hatred. The Government should withdraw the invitation.

Amber Rudd: I would simply repeat that we have not yet made the arrangements for the visit, but the invitation has been extended and it has been accepted.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Politics and Twitter are a toxic mix. For politicians, tweeting encourages the transmission of half-formed ideas instead of listening to the developed arguments of others. It promotes a culture of instant reaction as opposed to considered thought, and it provokes people to immediate outrage instead of pauseful reflection. Can my right hon. Friend tell the House how politicians taking to Twitter has led to an improvement in modern civilisation?

Amber Rudd: I think that is slightly beyond my capacity today. My hon. Friend is right in so far as I think that many of us could benefit from a little more considered thought and pauseful contemplation before we press reply to Twitter attacks.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): It is important that the messages of hate spread by the President of the United States are condemned as the vile acts that they truly are. I speak on behalf of my party when I urge the Government to rescind their offer of a state visit to a President who has used his global platform to propagate intolerance. May I ask the Home Secretary to elaborate further on the pressure that will be exerted on social media platforms, such as Twitter, to prevent such untrue and poisonous content from permeating our society?

Amber Rudd: I repeat that the invitation to the President for a visit has been extended and accepted. We must remember that the United States has such an important relationship with this country in keeping us safe, and I urge all hon. Members to keep in mind the importance of that relationship before rushing to make such changes. I hope that the hon. Gentleman has heard from me this morning how seriously we take the need to make sure that all illegal content, including extreme content, is taken down from Twitter and other online platforms; and the importance of the platforms taking a more active role in ensuring that such material does not stay up.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): In a cynical attempt to harness the Brexit vote in my constituency, the English Defence League last year sought to organise a far-right march. Just nine people showed up, but that is nine people too many. Although the abhorrent views of the EDL and Britain First do not represent the mainstream in this country, does the Home Secretary agree that there is still work to do to disabuse people of such views, and that we need to bring forward more measures to allow us to do that?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Those organisations in no way represent the views of the British people, as we all know. There is always more work to do, and, as he says, the presence of even nine supporters is unwelcome. As has been pointed out several times in the House today, the real danger is increasingly the encouragement of extremist activity online. That is where we are focusing much of our effort, to ensure that it is not allowed to continue.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): In her previous role as Home Secretary, the Prime Minister banned from entering this country individuals who had promoted organisations peddling the hate-filled ideology of fascism. This morning, David Duke, former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, applauded Donald Trump. *The New York Times* notes:

“No modern American president has promoted inflammatory content of this sort from an extremist organization.”

Not only has the commander-in-tweet done this, but he has defended it, publicly chastising the British Prime Minister for her comments. Putting aside the question of a state visit, should he even be allowed to enter our country? Unprecedented actions require unprecedented responses.

Amber Rudd: I point out to the hon. Lady that the Prime Minister has robustly replied to the President and made her views absolutely clear. On the hon. Lady's other proposal, we do not routinely comment on individual exclusion cases.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Is the Home Secretary satisfied that President Trump's behaviour—this is not an isolated incident—does not undermine our important security and co-operation relationship with the United States? May I also say that just because somebody stops using Twitter, it does not mean that they cease to be a twit?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend puts his finger on it, if I may say so, in the first half of his comment when he talks about the importance of that close relationship. However strongly hon. Members feel about the President, we must protect the particular relationship that we have with the US, which does so much to keep British people safe.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): If I am honest, I think the Home Secretary is missing something here. This was not an accident, and it was not stupid; it was deliberate and intentional. The evidence for that is that even after the Prime Minister said the President was wrong, he decided to stand by Britain First. I say to the Home Secretary that it is no good saying, “We've been robust.” The Government have been robust before, and it has not made the blindest bit of difference: he is a repeat offender, and this will go on and on. We cannot stand up to this kind of action and stand up to horrible racism—or pretend to do so—and then invite the man in through the front door.

In the past, when she was the Home Secretary, the Prime Minister repeatedly said that homophobes and racists who stir up hatred in this country will not be allowed into this country, and that if they come to this country they will be arrested. That is what should happen in this case, and the Home Secretary knows it. Just say it!

Amber Rudd: There is no pretence here: we are absolutely clear about the action we will take against people who propagate hate. The hon. Gentleman should not underestimate the Prime Minister's views on this and her absolute clarity in showing them to the public by criticising the President in her comment to him. I will not take any criticism from the hon. Gentleman on the fact that Conservative Members and the Government are committed to the agenda of making sure that we protect people and promote British values, and I will continue to take that position.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for her important words this morning, echoing those of the Prime Minister. Does the Home Secretary agree that all politicians and community leaders at every level and in every community have a duty to be temperate in their language, tolerant in their actions and mindful of their social media presence, and will she make sure that she holds content platforms to account so that community cohesion and understanding are maintained?

Amber Rudd: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is incredibly important to make sure that we support communities in their genuine efforts, plans and programmes to hold together, despite the difficulties that may come along. We saw that this year when, in spite of and in the wake of a series of terrorist attacks, our communities did hold together, and many of them went out of their way to support other faiths when other people were criticising them. That is the British way, those are our values and that is what we should be proud of.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): We must take a firm stance against hate speak and ensure that future generations do so as well. Will the Home Secretary and her colleagues consider supporting Holocaust education in schools so that younger generations understand the importance of standing up against discrimination and the very grave consequences of inaction?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady makes a very important point, and I thank her for raising it. The Holocaust Educational Trust does incredibly good and important work. I know that because some of the children in my schools in Hastings and Rye have been on such trips, and I have been on one myself. It is a very powerful way of remembering the terrible things that happened, and of learning how by remembering them we can make sure that they do not happen again. I absolutely support her point.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Does the Home Secretary share my astonishment at the fact that someone in the position of the President of the United States actually finds the time to trawl through Twitter looking for posts as abhorrent as the ones he has retweeted? Does she share my view that far from making America great again, his actions in retweeting those tweets reflect badly on his office and undermine the very principles on which the United States was founded?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and that is why the Prime Minister was so swift and so firm in her response to the President's tweets.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): When I think of Muslim children in Newcastle waking up to find themselves being attacked by the President of the most powerful nation on earth, because that is how it will appear to them, my heart bleeds. The 45th President is not accountable to the children of Newcastle—it is hard to see to whom he does hold himself accountable—but the social media giants are accountable, through the Home Secretary, so what is she going to do today to demonstrate that accountability?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady might refer her friends in the community to the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. He very much made his comments as a Muslim, and I think that other Muslims in this country might take comfort from them.

We are making sure that we provide the leadership necessary to have as much as possible of the hate speech and illegal information that is sometimes put online taken down. The House must understand that the relationship with the US is critical to making real progress with the online companies. They are American companies; they are based in Silicon Valley; they are subject to US law. If we are going to make real progress with these internet companies, we have to do it in close alliance with our American friends.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): When the Prime Minister has her next regular conversation with the United States President, could the Home Secretary ensure that she conveys to him that the purveying of this kind of hate speech simply serves the ends of those who wish to promote hatred between different communities in my constituency? Will she undertake to ask the Prime Minister to tell him that every time this kind of hate speech is perpetrated my black, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh and other minority constituents feel more fear and fear alienation and suspicion from others in the community, and that the President will not be welcome in this country because he is perpetrating and extending that hate speech?

Amber Rudd: We are clear that the sort of hatred that she describes and the sort of division that is sown by Britain First, for instance, is unwelcome here in the UK. We will always take action to call it out. We operate in the Home Office to take down information that gets up on the internet that should not be there. We take down about 2,000 pieces of terrorist content a week. We are always stepping up to ensure that there is more information out there that can help to bind our communities together. I share the hon. Lady's view. I have the same response in my constituency. I want to be absolutely clear that our communities will hold together, and that we abhor all hate crime, and we will always say that.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): May I offer the Government a way out of the diplomatic ditch that they are in? Her Majesty the Queen has been cutting back on her engagements due to her great and welcome age. She has a royal wedding to look forward to next year and the birth of a new great grandchild. Do not those facts alone justify the Government's announcing the postponement of the state visit by the President of the United States for at least, say, three years?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his thoughtful advice to the royal family. As I have said, the dates have not yet been agreed.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am very saddened by what Trump has done. Like many people in our country, I have been a great friend of America. Indeed, as a very young man, I emigrated to the United States, and still cherish my old green card. So many of my American friends and relatives have said to me in the past few hours, "This man does not speak for America. This man is betraying the traditions of the United States of freedom, liberty and respect for everyone, whatever their religion or background." Please, as we negotiate this thing, stop this man coming on a state visit. If he comes, there will be unparalleled demonstrations in this country. Please will the Home Secretary act now before it is too late?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. Like him, I am a great admirer of America, and I have friends with different views, shall we say, to those of the President, who are keen to communicate them to me sometimes. As for the invitation, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his views, but no date has been agreed yet.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I emphasise that what the President of the United States has said on Twitter is not what the American people feel. I am sure that most Americans are embarrassed by and abhor what the President has done. The Home Secretary is in charge of policing in this country so this is a very serious and direct question. Inciting racial and religious hatred is a crime in this country. Have Twitter or the President of the United States committed a crime?

Amber Rudd: We keep all potential crimes of the type that the hon. Gentleman has referred to under review. I will not comment on individual cases of the type that he has referred to. I am sure that he can conclude by himself on the line between free speech and criminal activity. I think I will leave it at that.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Two years ago, I tabled an early-day motion calling for then presidential candidate Trump to be banned from visiting the United Kingdom until he retracted the extremely divisive comments he had made at that time. Given his tweets yesterday and overnight, it is clear that he has not changed. That is the key point. Will the Home Secretary tell me why it is right for someone so intent on stirring up hatred, contrary to the values of this country, to be invited here for an all-expenses-paid state visit at the expense of the taxpayer?

Amber Rudd: What about the values of the American people, of whom he is the President? So many Members on both sides of the House have said how much they admire the American people. Those are the values that I admire and with which I feel we have much in common.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): As the Home Secretary will know very well, in this tolerant country of ours, non-Muslims and Muslims live in peace together as friends and neighbours—sometimes as members of the same families. How do I go back and explain to my

constituents that there is a national interest in inviting somebody who is there to divide our communities, one from the other?

Amber Rudd: I would urge the hon. Gentleman to make, perhaps, some of the points that I have made today in the House—that Mr Trump is the American President and we have such admiration and affection for the American people and share values with them in so many different ways. We are also so grateful to their intelligence and security services, with whom we work so closely. The closeness of that work, the trust between us, allows them to help save British lives so effectively. That is why we have such a close and special relationship with the Americans.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Taking the charitable view that the President of the United States does not know the character of the organisation whose vile utterances he has endorsed, will the Home Secretary assure the House that the Government will make him well aware of their view of the character of this organisation and its effects, so that he has the opportunity clearly to distance himself from any association with it before there can be any question of his visiting the United Kingdom?

Amber Rudd: It is certainly our intention to be absolutely clear that the type of organisation that the President appeared to be promoting in his retweet is wholly unwelcome and full of hate, and we will continue to call that out. I think my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made that clear in her criticism of him, but we will not miss an opportunity to make that point again—and we will do so strongly and firmly.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Back in 2010, the now Prime Minister, as Home Secretary, banned radical Indian televangelist preacher Zakir Naik from entering the UK for his repeated pattern of unacceptable behaviour—in particular his line that “every Muslim is a terrorist”. Her exact words at the time were: “I am not willing to allow those...not...conducive to the public good to enter the UK.”

Surely the same applies to President Trump and his frequent repugnant outbursts? We are in Islamophobia awareness month, which was launched here the other day. The Government’s own Casey report was quoted. It says that trigger events feed Islamophobia, which means that women have their hijabs ripped off them; that grandads are murdered on the way back from prayers; and that pigs’ heads are left on mosque doorsteps. As a Muslim, I ask the Home Secretary to do the same as her predecessor, our Prime Minister, did in those previous examples. A rapper was also excluded for his misogynist lyrics. Can the Home Secretary not just continue on that track and ban this visit altogether?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady, particularly for her point about Islamophobia, which we take incredibly seriously. That is why it featured so strongly in the hate crime action plan that I launched last year and why we have provided extra money to make sure that mosques can be protected. We have also given additional financial support for Tell MAMA, which does such great work in combating Islamophobia.

We are very serious about making sure that the type of hate crime that the Prime Minister addressed as Home Secretary is taken seriously and stopped so that we can protect people. She was absolutely right to ban the people whom the hon. Lady referred to. We do not comment on individual exclusion cases, but I will make sure that we always look very carefully at that when it is appropriate.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): My constituents know only too well where extremism ultimately leads. The actions of the President cannot be isolated as a mistake; as has already been said, he is a repeat offender. These are his views, and anyone else who held them would not be welcome in this country. The Home Secretary must recognise the double standards that she is representing by saying that she condemns the President’s actions while at the same time opening her arms by inviting him to come to this country. Surely she must send the clear message that he is not welcome here.

Amber Rudd: I do not accept that there are double standards. What I accept is that we have been totally consistent in ensuring that we call out hate crime and take aggressive action in order to stop it. That is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister responded so strongly to the tweet, and why other Cabinet Ministers have taken action as well. We will always ensure that we take action to stop the vile hate crime that sometimes takes place.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Has any member of the UK Government asked for these tweets to be taken down?

Amber Rudd: I shall have to come back to the hon. Lady on that.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Can the Home Secretary provide me with some guidance on how I should respond to residents in my incredibly diverse constituency when they ask me why our Government are affording someone with such abhorrent, vile, fascist, bigoted views the luxury of a state visit? If we do not take action today, when will we?

Amber Rudd: I ask the hon. Lady to refer her constituents—as I will refer mine—to the Prime Minister’s strong response. I also ask her to explain to them why the strong relationship with the US is so much in their interests, and to explain that action that we have shared with the intelligence services in the US helps to keep British people safe. We do not want to jeopardise any of that. The hon. Lady shakes her head, but this is an important point about keeping her constituents safe. That relationship is so critical to us that I would not want to harm it at all.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Surely the robust response that is required now is a withdrawal of the invitation.

Amber Rudd: The important step that we can take to stop the promulgation of the type of hate crime that has been promoted by Britain First, and by other extreme right-wing groups, is to work with the major internet companies to ensure that more action is taken. That is

[Amber Rudd]

exactly the area in which the UK has been leading internationally, and in which the Prime Minister has been leading at the recent United Nations conference. The whole House can rely on the Government to ensure that those companies deliver for us.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for submitting his urgent question, and I thank the Home Secretary and the shadow Home Secretary for being present on this important occasion. Let me also express my gratitude to all colleagues for participating in a very important set of exchanges.

Before I call the shadow Leader of the House to ask the business question, I should emphasise that there will be huge pressure on time from now on. There is to be an emergency debate under Standing Order 24 which can continue for up to three hours, and two debates are to be conducted under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee. There is therefore a premium on short questions and short answers.

Business of the House

11.29 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House update the House on the previously announced business?

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

MONDAY 4 DECEMBER—Continuation in Committee of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 4).

TUESDAY 5 DECEMBER—Opposition day (6th allotted day): there will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 6 DECEMBER—Continuation in Committee of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 5).

THURSDAY 7 DECEMBER—Debate on a motion on prison reform and safety, followed by general debate on the UK fishing industry. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 8 DECEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 11 December will include:

MONDAY 11 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Finance Bill.

TUESDAY 12 DECEMBER—Continuation in Committee of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 6).

WEDNESDAY 13 DECEMBER—Continuation in Committee of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 7).

THURSDAY 14 DECEMBER—Debate on a motion on equality of pension provision for women, followed by debate on a motion on hormone pregnancy tests. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 15 DECEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 18 December will include:

MONDAY 18 DECEMBER—Consideration in Committee of the Finance Bill (day 1).

TUESDAY 19 DECEMBER—Continuation in Committee of the Finance Bill (day 2).

WEDNESDAY 20 DECEMBER—Conclusion of consideration in Committee of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 8).

THURSDAY 21 DECEMBER—A general debate on Russian interference in UK politics and society, followed by a general debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 22 DECEMBER—A very merry Christmas to everybody.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for December will include:

MONDAY 4 DECEMBER—Debate on an e-petition relating to public sector pay.

THURSDAY 7 DECEMBER—Debate on the Women and Equalities Committee report on women in the House of Commons after the 2020 election and the Government's response.

MONDAY 11 DECEMBER—Debate on e-petitions relating to a referendum on the deal for the UK's exit from the European Union.

THURSDAY 14 DECEMBER—Debate on the Home Affairs Committee report on asylum accommodation and the Government's response, followed by a debate on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report on HM Government's support for UK victims of IRA attacks that used Gaddafi-supplied Semtex and weapons and the Government's response.

I am sure the whole House will want to join me in marking World AIDS Day, which takes place tomorrow. Significant progress has been made in fighting HIV, but we must continue the work to end stigma, end HIV transmission and end the isolation experienced by people living with HIV for good.

As I have said many times, Scotland is much loved across the whole country. Both the UK Government and the UK Parliament are committed to championing Scotland and standing up for Scotland's interests, so may I take this opportunity to wish everyone, especially our friends north of the border, a very happy St Andrew's day?

Finally, may I add my sincere congratulations to Prince Harry and Meghan Markle on their engagement, and wish them all the very best for the future?

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for updating the House on the forthcoming business. Can she say when the Report stage and Third Reading of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will come before the House, and will she publish the motion on restoration and renewal before Christmas? I am pleased to say that the subject of the Opposition-day debate will be universal credit.

I also wanted to thank Mr Speaker for granting the debate on Yemen, as one of the two hon. Members who were born in Yemen—the other being my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). We have very happy memories of that country. One of the abiding memories at Christmas time was of Father Christmas arriving on a camel. In providing the debate, Mr Speaker has given the gift of life and hope to those suffering people in Yemen.

I thank the Leader of the House for indicating that the List of Ministers' Interests will be updated shortly. I am just not clear what the word "shortly" means. Section 7.5 of the ministerial code states that

"a statement covering relevant Ministers' interests will be published twice yearly."

That was honoured in 2016, but we have not seen anything yet.

The Leader of the House mentioned 22 December and wished everyone a merry Christmas, but will she ensure, by writing to all the Departments, that there will not be a plethora of statements published on 21 December? It would be difficult to put forward our constituents' views or to question Ministers then. There was an urgent question on the forensic services. The Minister described it as a serious matter. Indeed it is, but the written statement was published the day before the Budget.

Transparency and accountability are the watchwords of our democracy, so perhaps the Leader of the House will explain why there is no general "amendment to the

law" resolution. There have been only five occasions when that has not happened at such a time. In 1929, it happened immediately before a general election. On the other occasions, in 1974, 1997, 2010 and July 2017, it happened immediately after a general election. "Erskine May" points out that:

"On occasions, and in particular when it has been necessary to proceed rapidly with a Finance Bill in anticipation of a dissolution of Parliament, the 'Amendment of the law' resolution has been omitted."

Will the Leader of the House update us on the Government's thinking on why there is not a chance for the Opposition parties to put forward our alternative case? We have had listening chances before, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) found out when she tabled an amendment to the Finance Bill to ensure that the tampon tax was put through. This is about democracy. The Leader of the House and I have had a debate about how Parliament is being rigged. The Government have rigged Committees so that they have a majority on them, when they do not command one in Parliament.

Turning from treating Parliament with contempt to an actual contempt of the House, I know that people are not out on the streets of Northampton or Walsall chanting, "What do we want? Sectoral analysis. When do we want it? Now!" They have elected us to deal with that, and on behalf of those constituents, we want to see those sectoral analyses. The motion was very clear. It said that the impact assessments and the analyses of those 58 important sectors should be handed to the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union—we are not asking for them to be published—so that the Select Committee can look at them in private session, as Select Committees do all the time. That is what we want. How can the Committee possibly hold an inquiry without the evidence? Parliament is sovereign, as people often like to tell us, and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has to listen to Parliament. Our sovereign Parliament has instructed him to give up those papers.

The Leader of the House has alluded to a number of anniversaries. My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) reminded us at Prime Minister's Question Time that Sunday is disability day. I know that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is making a statement after business questions, and I hope that he will address the Government's assertion that there is parity of esteem between physical conditions and mental health. A constituent of mine has been penalised in her personal independence payment assessment while her mother is going through cancer treatment. She may not get her PIP because of her mental health condition. Will the Leader of the House please ensure that there is parity of esteem in PIP assessments?

I hope the statement will also set out how the Government are dealing with errors in the payment of employment and support allowance, because 75,000 people have been affected but only 1,000 have been contacted. It is good that the Secretary of State is coming to the House, because the Chancellor's financial statement—all 8,000 words of it—did not mention the words "disability" or "people with disabilities" once. People with disabilities and their families are set to lose £5,500 a year by 2022 because of existing tax and benefit changes. It was a flatlining Budget from a flatlining Government.

[Valerie Vaz]

Tomorrow is World AIDS Day. Diana, Princess of Wales, did much to dispel the myths around AIDS and I echo the words of the Leader of the Opposition in congratulating her younger son, Prince Harry, and Meghan Markle on their engagement. It is fitting that they have chosen a visit to Nottingham Contemporary, a gallery that will be hosting a Terrence Higgins Trust World AIDS Day charity fair, as their first public event. We wish them as long and happy a life together as Prince Harry's grandparents are celebrating, and we congratulate Prince Philip on his new honour as he and the Queen celebrate their 70 years together.

Finally, it is St Andrew's day—one of the patron saints of our United Kingdom—and we wish everyone called Andrew a very happy day.

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, the hon. Lady raises a wide range of interesting and thought-provoking points. The Report stage and Third Reading of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and the motion on restoration and renewal will be brought forward as soon as we can, but she will appreciate that it is not always possible to give notice so far in advance. Last week, she welcomed my announcing the business up until Christmas, and I will always seek to be as helpful as possible to the House, including in providing information on the future tabling of different items of business.

The hon. Lady said that the subject of the Opposition day would be universal credit. The Government welcome all views, and we have had several debates on this subject in recent weeks. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions was pleased to come to the House to address the motion that was passed by this House on universal credit, which I pledged would be the case whenever such a motion is passed by the House. He fulfilled that pledge within the 12-week timeframe, and I hope that hon. Members noted that. I look forward to this further debate.

I share the hon. Lady's enthusiasm for discussing the plight of those living in Yemen in these terrible times, and we are all looking forward to the emergency debate later today.

I cannot give the hon. Lady a specific date, but the register of Ministers' interests will be provided as soon as possible. I cannot give her a specific date. Quite a lot of work needs to be done to compile and finalise the register, and it will be provided just as soon as we can.

The hon. Lady asked us to avoid making written ministerial statements on 21 December. Ministers obviously come under criticism for publishing anything outside of sitting days, but she now wants to criticise the Government for publishing things on sitting days. I do not think we can accept that sitting days should be ring-fenced simply because we are drawing near to the end of a sitting period, and she needs to bear in mind that Ministers make great efforts to ensure that announcements are made while the House is sitting, giving the House the opportunity to consider them.

The hon. Lady made a point about the Opposition's ability to put forward an alternative case on the Finance Bill. I will write to her on that point, if I may, because I am actually looking into the matter at the moment.

The hon. Lady suggests that no one in her constituency or mine is walking about demanding Brexit impact assessments, but I think she underestimates the good people of Northamptonshire—[*Interruption.*] And Oxfordshire. My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who is my PPS, and I are clear that our constituents are interested. The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and his ministerial team have been clear that the analysis was not a series of impact assessments examining what exiting the EU would mean for the 58 sectors. In order to satisfy the motion of 1 November, we have taken a lot of time to bring together the sectoral analyses in a way that is accessible and informative for the Exiting the European Union Committee. The analyses are being made available to all Members of both the House of Commons and the House of Lords in a private reading room, and the Secretary of State will meet the Select Committee on Wednesday 6 December.

Finally, the hon. Lady raised the important issue of parity of esteem for mental and physical disability. I absolutely share her determination that we should achieve that, and it is the goal and intention of the Government. I am sure that she, like me, will welcome the fact that spending on disability has increased by £7 billion since 2010. This Government are determined to enable people with disabilities to have more control over their lives and to seek work that suits their capabilities to give them the chance to improve their own lives as far as possible.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Colleagues will have heard what Mr Speaker said about the pressure on time today. He has indicated to me that he would like the emergency debate on Yemen to start no later than 1 o'clock, in which case I will run business questions until quarter past 12. There is then another statement, so colleagues who might prefer to intervene on the statement should perhaps bear that in mind.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House find time for a debate on boosting trade between China and the United Kingdom? Only yesterday Hylink, China's largest digital marketing agency, launched its office at the Shard, and I am delighted it did so with a British managing director, James Hebbert.

Andrea Leadsom: Having seen for myself the huge opportunity in China for our food and drinks businesses, I completely agree with my hon. Friend. On his specific point regarding digital marketing, a number of support agencies specialise in helping UK firms to export to and invest in China. These businesses demonstrate that exporting to China is within reach of our small and medium-sized enterprises as well as our larger companies, and we welcome the decision of Hylink to open an office in London.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish

you and all hon. Ladies and Gentlemen a happy St Andrew's day, and lang may yer lum reek—there's a challenge for *Hansard*.

The Scottish National party has now joined an exclusive club with all the Opposition parties, which the Government will not vote against. Thanks to the Tory vote refuseniks, we now have unanimous agreement in this House to tackle WASPI injustice. We were wondering what type of motion might tempt the Tory vote-phobes into the Division Lobby. Given the childish nature of their failure to participate in the democratic structures of the House, maybe a motion that "This Government smells," might tempt them into the Division Lobby to try to preserve their dignity.

This situation will not end well for the Government, and I know that Mr Speaker is considering my correspondence to the effect that the Government may be in contempt of the House following their failure fully to comply with an earlier binding motion. Mr Speaker has been typically generous with the Government, but his patience must be running thin. It is either compliance or contempt, and we must return the House to a position in which this Government vote. This is a national Parliament, a sovereign Parliament; it is not a sixth-form debating society.

Lastly, the latest piece of Brexit chaotic cluelessness comes in the form of a £50 billion repayment bill. It has apparently gone from "go whistle" to "what's your sort code?" The total bill to the United Kingdom of leaving the European Union because of this Brexit madness must now come close to hundreds of billions of pounds. That is why we must see these Brexit sectoral impact assessments. We need a proper debate about the true cost of Brexit, and we need to hear whether there is any price that would make the Government think again.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his feisty remarks. I was going to invite him for a bit of haggis, neeps and tatties in the Members' Tea Room after business questions, but I might think again as he now feels the Government smell—I am not sure that is even orderly language. Nevertheless, I am willing to overlook it.

The hon. Gentleman mentions the specific issue of the pension age for women. Of course he will be aware that this issue has been raised on a number of occasions. The Conservatives in government have committed more than £1 billion to support those affected so that no woman will see her pension age change by more than 18 months compared with the Pensions Act 1995 timetable. He will recognise that the great news that we are all living longer means that the age at which people reach their state retirement and therefore draw their state pension needs to change with it. We are seeking fairness between men and women in that regard.

The hon. Gentleman asks about voting. As I made very clear in my previous statement, we recognise that any motion voted on by the House is binding on the House. Opposition day motions that are voted on and approved are binding on the House. However, as Mr Speaker has made clear, they are not binding on the Government. What I have agreed, in recognition of the House's desire, quite rightly, to see what actions are taken as a result of motions approved by the House, is that a statement will be provided in respect of any Opposition day motion passed by the House, with a

Minister explaining exactly what actions have been taken as a result. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions came before this House to provide such an update only this week, and further statements will be made in the near future.

As the hon. Gentleman will know, his final point about the cost of leaving the EU is not at all something this Government have said is the case; it is simply something that is part of the negotiations. The Government are committed to seeking the best possible deal for the UK as we leave the EU. The negotiations are in a positive phase and we hope to see some good, constructive results from the December Council. We all await those negotiations with enormous interest.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): May we have a debate on the importance and value of further education and skills, especially following the disgraceful attack, yet again, by the former chief inspector of schools, Michael Wilshaw, who told FE colleges to "get off their backsides". That is entirely wrong, as 70% of our FE colleges are good or outstanding. He has previously said that FE is a Cinderella sector, but it is worth remembering not only that Cinderella married a prince, but that we have to banish the two ugly sisters of snobbery and intolerance.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for young people getting on in life, and I absolutely share his enthusiasm for the contribution of so many excellent FE colleges in giving young people the opportunities they need and deserve.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement, and may I quickly point out to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) that having a reekie lum is in contravention of the Clean Air Acts?

This afternoon, we have two important debates scheduled by the Backbench Business Committee, one on the treatment of small and medium-sized enterprises by RBS Global Restructuring Group and the other on mental health and suicide within the autism community. As a result of an almost exceptional set of circumstances far beyond the control of the Backbench Business Committee, these two important debates will be severely restricted and squeezed for time. In both debates, there will be public support here on site, with constituents visiting this place to witness their very real concerns being debated. May we now look at a potential revision of Standing Orders to enable some measure of protected time for such debates for the Backbench Business Committee in the future? Our constituents, and the constituents of all Back Benchers, deserve that at least.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. I think we are all disappointed to see the constraints that have arisen, through no individual fault but just as a result of circumstances, on the two important debates he mentions. I will certainly take away the point he makes and look at it.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I want the Government to make a statement on how they are going to involve leaseholders in the discussions on high-rise buildings with cladding. The Department for Communities and Local Government is having meetings with the managing agents and others, but leaseholders,

[*Sir Peter Bottomley*]

who may be isolated, are not being brought in and not being brought together. Would it be possible for the Leader of the House to consider asking that Department whether it could announce, before next Tuesday, how it is going to get leaseholders involved and how the leaseholders can talk to each other, so that they have a united front and share information?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises something that is very important to all of us: ensuring the safety of those who live in high-rise buildings. If he would like to write to me or talk to me after business questions, I will certainly see whether I can help to raise this matter with that Department.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): May we have an urgent debate on shale gas fracking planning applications? In my constituency, INEOS, a multinational petrochemical company, has applied to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to avoid local democracy by taking planning decisions out of the local council's hands and giving it to the national Planning Inspectorate. I would like to ask that Secretary of State how that fits with the Tory manifesto he has just fought on, which promised to "maintain public confidence" in the shale gas industry and "uphold our rigorous environmental protections"?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman might wish to raise that specific question in DCLG oral questions on 4 December. As he will know, however, the subject of shale gas exploration has received a huge amount of attention in this place and the regulations are very strong. It is right that the UK economy takes the opportunity to benefit from the transition from high carbon emitting coal, through lower carbon emitting gas, to the renewables future we all want to see.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): May we have a debate on a weed called floating pennywort? It is a strong contender for the worst aquatic weed in the UK and it is affecting large stretches of the Thames, including around Henley. A debate would allow us to sort out how to deal with it.

Andrea Leadsom: I agree with my hon. Friend that floating pennywort is a highly invasive non-native species that has a significant environmental impact. The Environment Agency has removed thousands of tonnes of this plant as part of a co-ordinated programme of removal and spraying to control its growth. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that the EA redoubled its efforts to remove floating pennywort from the Thames and its tributaries throughout October and November and is putting in place a spraying, removal and monitoring programme from spring 2018.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): This Saturday, I will be taking part in Small Business Saturday, visiting businesses on Deptford High Street and Ladywell Christmas market, and finishing with a drink in Lewisham's new bar, Suttons Radio. May we have a debate on the support the Government can provide to help small businesses to thrive and grow?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight her local small businesses and their important value to the local economy. The Government enormously

support small businesses and the contribution they make right across the United Kingdom. I am sure that many Members will be doing something similar to the hon. Lady and visiting their own local small businesses, and I encourage them all to do so.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Yesterday saw the long-awaited publication by the Labour Mayor of London of the draft London plan. It could lead to the end of back gardens in suburbia and the abolition of car-parking spaces in all new developments. At the same time, not a single new affordable home has been built on his watch. The plan will affect all Londoners, so may we have a debate in Government time on the drastic impact it will have throughout London?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to hold the Labour Mayor of London to account in the way that he does, and to point out that we do need thriving economies. London absolutely needs much more housing, affordable housing and greater infrastructure. Unfortunately, the Mayor all too often criticises central Government for his own failings.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): There was absolute astonishment from MPs of all parties at the fact that the Chancellor made no mention of defence in his Budget. Given the crisis that defence in this country is currently facing, will the Leader of the House ask the Chancellor to come to the House and explain how we are going to stop cuts to the numbers of soldiers, aircraft and Marines, so that we can defend our country properly?

Andrea Leadsom: First and foremost, the Government support all our armed forces and our defence sector to an enormous extent. We have committed to meet our NATO pledge to spend 2% of GDP on defence every year until 2022 and we plan to spend £178 billion on our equipment plan between 2016 and 2026. By 2025, we will have a highly capable expeditionary force of around 50,000, up from 30,000. It is important that we look at how our defence needs are changing. That review is vital to this country's future security needs.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Earlier this week, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy made an excellent statement to introduce the industrial strategy, many strands of which will be of particular benefit to constituencies such as mine, Cleethorpes. Do the Government have any plans to debate in Government time the various aspects of the strategy, particularly the teacher development premium, which will be of great value in my area?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his constituency. I agree that we should all welcome the industrial strategy, which sets out how we are building a Britain fit for the future and how we will help businesses to create better, higher-paying jobs, with investment in the skills, industries and infrastructure that will make Britain an enormous success in the years to come.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Only 10% of children on free school meals in Barnsley go on to university. Can we have a debate in Government time

about social mobility in Britain, as our future economic success depends on all children having the opportunities to succeed?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that children are the future and that we need to do everything we can to support them. Making their lives better than those of the generation before is our aspiration. I am sure that she welcomes the fact, as we all do, that there are now 1.8 million more children in good and outstanding schools than there were in 2010, and that there are more than 3.4 million apprenticeships for young people since 2010. It is absolutely vital that we do everything we can to support their future as we move into this enormous industrial change that gives us the opportunity to build the industries of the future.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I do not know whether the Leader of the House has seen the migration figures today, but net migration is a third lower in the past year than it was before the EU referendum. Can we have a debate in Government time on immigration, so that we can talk about the Government's progress towards the target of tens of thousands, and the fact that we will be able to reach it when we come out of the EU and end free movement?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of immigration in this country both in terms of the enormous contribution made by those who have come here to live and make their lives here, and the pressure that high and uncontrolled immigration has wrought on some of our public services. Yes, I absolutely encourage him to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that we can discuss the relative merits of uncontrolled versus controlled migration.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Less than 48 hours ago, the Palmer and Harvey company went into administration, which means hundreds of job losses in my constituency just weeks before Christmas. Like something from a Dickens novel, workers found out when they arrived for their shift and saw the gates shut. Despite that, the administrator, PwC, has not responded to multiple attempts by me to contact it. Will the Leader of the House ask the Business Secretary to intervene to support me and the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers in trying to find out what is going on and what can be done to help my constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sorry to hear about that. If the hon. Gentleman writes to me, I will be very happy to take it up with the Business Secretary.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I recently had the honour of becoming patron of the Mary Ann Evans Hospice, which is a charitably funded hospice that provides really valuable services to my constituents and reduces pressure on the NHS. The hospice has made me aware of funding challenges that it and many others face, so can we have an urgent debate on the options available for hospices to make it easier for them to apply for NHS funding?

Andrea Leadsom: Huge congratulations to my hon. Friend on his new role. Hospices right around the country, including Cynthia Spencer Hospice and Catherine

House that serve my own constituents so well, deliver excellent care and contribute to the well-being of their local communities. Millions of families benefit from them. I am sure that I can speak for all Members when I say how grateful we are to them. NHS England has developed a new payment system for end-of-life care, which is designed to be fairer and more transparent, and that will further improve care for patients.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Alison Thewliss.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Gosh, I was not expecting to be called so soon. Can we have a debate, please, in Government time, on the postcode lottery of asylum appeals? Some 28% were successful in Glasgow, compared with 47% at the Taylor House centre in London. My constituents deserve a fair hearing when they go for their asylum tribunals.

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree that all asylum appeals should be treated with equal importance and respect. If the hon. Lady wishes to seek an Adjournment debate on the specific concern that she has in her own constituency, then that would be viewed very favourably by Mr Speaker.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Further to the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), who is leaving the Chamber, will my right hon. Friend grant time for a debate on the importance of improved productivity for the growth of the economy in the United Kingdom?

Andrea Leadsom: I know that my hon. Friend, who is a former teacher, is a huge advocate of developing the skills of young people. I share his enthusiasm for our new industrial strategy that sets out how we will build a Britain fit for the future and ready to take advantage of the extraordinary advances in technology that can really transform lives for the better.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): The Leader of the House might remember that my first question to her, back in June, was about gun crime and police cuts, following 10 such incidents in my constituency that month. It has not gone unnoticed that there was no mention of police cuts continuing in the Budget last week. More and more of my constituents are raising crime and fear of crime as one of the blights on their lives, and Merseyside police are stretched to the limits, having lost 1,000 police officers and £100 million a year from their budget. The situation, as is, is unsustainable. We need a debate in Government time on police cuts and the effects of crime in our constituencies.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a serious issue, and of course we know that the fear of crime is widespread around the country, but I am sure he will be pleased to know that the rate for crimes traditionally measured by the independent crime survey for England and Wales has fallen by 9% over the last year, which is a continuation of the overall downward trend. He should also be reassured to know that we are protecting police budgets in real terms and that the proportion of officers in frontline roles has increased since 2010 to over 93% now. There are, of course, individual issues in particular

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

policing areas, however, and if he feels that that is the case in his area, I would encourage him to raise the matter through an Adjournment debate.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I am sure that, like me, the Leader of the House has been inundated with emails about animal sentience. Many constituents have contacted me following an email from the lobbying company 38 Degrees that sadly contained many mistruths about a vote in the House. Through my office, I have requested a correction, but will she advise me on how I and other Members can combat fake news and misinformation when it is passed on to our constituents directly from such sources?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, my hon. Friend is quite right to raise this issue. Matters of concern to the public must always be raised with us, but groups such as 38 Degrees should not, whether inadvertently or maliciously, spread information that is just not true, and when something is proven not to be true, as in this case, it should be immediately withdrawn or corrected. We are very aware of the concerns around fake news, and as part of our manifesto commitment, work is under way through the digital charter to make sure that high-quality news online has a sustainable future and that we have an accurate news environment.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be aware that over the last three weeks I have made two speeches about the impact on me of bullying in school. Since those speeches, I have been inundated by adults and children in school saying that they are under constant attack through cyber-bullying. Will she find Government time for a debate about the impact of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram on bullying and young people's lives and wellbeing?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this point. Bullying, and cyber-bullying in particular, are a real scourge of modern life, particularly for young people, and I certainly would welcome him seeking a Westminster Hall debate on the subject. He might be aware that a Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee inquiry will be looking into this issue. He might want to respond to that.

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): A growing number of companies around the UK are seeing the value of installing energy efficiency measures and clean tech in their premises. On the refurbishment of this place, will the Leader of the House use her influence to ensure that we set the very highest standards for energy efficiency and the deployment of clean tech so that we can lead by example, reduce costs and showcase the very best of British clean technologies for export around the world?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely share my hon. Friend's enthusiasm for clean technology and reducing our carbon footprint—I am sure that the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) shares that enthusiasm—and can assure him that throughout the R and R process, as we seek to restore this beautiful palace, we will take advantage of the opportunities to reduce its carbon footprint.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Can we have debate or statement, or—better still—will the Leader of the House have a word with the Work and Pensions Secretary, about HSBC's pension clawback? Employees in HSBC Midland Bank's defined benefit occupational pension scheme believe that they were not adequately made aware of the clawback feature. Clawback reduces the bank's pension contribution when the basic state pension becomes available. This means that many staff were denied the opportunity to make additional financial plans for their retirement. Other banks have not applied, or have since withdrawn, this scheme. Will she do all she can to help us with this situation?

Andrea Leadsom: This issue has been raised before in business questions, and a couple of constituents have also contacted me about it. It is a matter of concern that needs to be looked into, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek an Adjournment debate.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for her St Andrew's day greeting. Does her offer of haggis, tatties and neeps in the Tea Room apply to her Scottish Conservative colleagues?

The gulf between the tax paid by Scots and the tax paid by people in the rest of the UK looks set to widen further when the Scottish Government unveil their budget plans on 14 December. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the hugely damaging consequences of such a tax hike for Scotland? After last week's Budget boosted the Scottish Government by £2 billion over the next three years, the Scottish Government need to explain why they think that raising income tax is justified.

Andrea Leadsom: I am always delighted to meet my hon. Friend and our other hon. Friends from Scotland at any time. Income tax powers were an important part of the Smith Commission's recommendations and we have devolved them through the Scotland Act 2016. How the Scottish Government choose to use those powers is a decision for them. However, I completely agree with my hon. Friend; I do not see how making Scotland the highest taxed part of the UK can be the right thing to do. I cannot see why the Scottish National party would choose to drive away growth and talent. Let us be clear that income tax is not the Government's money. It is money that has been earned by the people of this country. That is why the Conservatives in Westminster and in Holyrood will always stand up for low taxes.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give me an approximate time that one should wait for a response from the Prime Minister to a letter signed by 111 MPs regarding the important economic contribution of international students in the UK, particularly in our regions and with regard to the industrial strategy? Is that the sort of thing to apply for a debate on, given its cross-party support?

Andrea Leadsom: If the matter carries cross-party support, as the hon. Lady suggests, it is most certainly a candidate for a Westminster Hall or a BackBench Business debate. With regards to the question about the time that it will take for the Prime Minister to respond to the

letter, I can forward the hon. Lady's request to the Prime Minister if she would like to take this up with me by email.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I add my voice to another matter that commands cross-party support: the importance of small businesses and Small Business Saturday, when I will be visiting businesses in my constituency of Redditch. We have a number of successful ones, including Astwood Carpentry and the Inn Plaice in Headless Cross, which has the best fish and chips. Can the Leader of the House find the time for a debate in Government time on the importance of keeping taxes on small businesses low?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a great advocate for her constituency of Redditch. All this talk of food is making us all hungry. Small Business Saturday is a grassroots, non-commercial campaign that highlights small business successes, and encourages consumers to shop locally and support small businesses, which is something that everyone across this House seeks to do.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): May I actually congratulate the Government—and the Scottish Government, just to make that clear—on something that they have done this week? There has been a change in blood donation rules for gay and bisexual men, as the ban has come down from 12 months to three months. That now means that thousands more gay men can give blood than could previously. But can we have a statement on this? The excellent news does not seem to have caught the attention of the media this week, and we need to discuss how we can make it much more widely known to encourage people to donate blood.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has just made sure that this news will receive some media attention, and I congratulate him on doing so. He raises the matter of a valuable and important contribution to the country's blood stocks. I am sure that many who were previously unaware of the news will be delighted.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, may I also wish you and the whole House a very happy St Andrew's day?

Can we have a debate on the excellent decision by the UK Government to bypass the failing SNP Scottish Government for the next roll-out of broadband? Does my right hon. Friend share my bemusement at the reaction of Scotland's First Minister, who has suggested that Scottish Conservative MPs and even the Scottish media have been misleading on this issue? Does my right hon. Friend also agree that Nicola Sturgeon should stop burying her head on this issue, and actually start burying some connections so that my Moray constituents and many across Scotland can get the broadband speeds they deserve?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend's priorities are always in the right place: looking after his constituents. In September 2017, we announced wave one of the local full fibre networks programme in six locations across the UK, including Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire. In parallel to this announcement, we have written to all local councils seeking expressions of interest, and there were more than 130 responses. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The programme is intended to achieve better and faster broadband roll-out for all the people of Scotland, including his constituents.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): When the Science Museum said that Hull could not have Amy Johnson's plane, Jason, for the city of culture celebrations this year, local artist Leonard J Brown worked with inmates at Hull Prison to create a replica, which is now in Hull Paragon station. Can we please have a statement from the Ministry of Justice on why it has now decided that that plane, which means so much to the city, is going to be moved down the road to York without asking the artist or key players in Hull about its future?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate Hull on the excellent work it has done as the current city of culture; I understand that the local economy has benefited from more than £3 billion of investment from Hull's role. It is an amazing achievement. I suggest that the hon. Lady looks into having a Westminster Hall debate to raise this point with the relevant Minister.

Work, Health and Disability

12.17 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr David Gauke): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Command Paper being published today by my Department and the Department of Health.

Good work promotes good health. It enables people to be economically independent, and gives them more choices and opportunities to fulfil other ambitions in life. A country that works for everyone needs to ensure that all who can work or undertake meaningful activity have the chance to do so, and that the right care and support is in place to enable all to thrive in work throughout their lives. Our labour market is in its strongest position for years, with the United Kingdom's employment rate at a near historic high of 75% and around 600,000 more disabled people in work than four years ago. Despite this, only around half of disabled people are in work, but many disabled people and people with health conditions can and want to work. That means that too many people are missing the opportunity to develop their talents and connect with the world of work, and the range of positive impacts that come from doing so, including good health and social outcomes. That is why it is important that we act now.

With around one in six working-age adults reporting a disability, it is clear that health and disability issues affect the working lives of millions of people. The majority of long-term health conditions are acquired in adulthood, and inclusive workplaces are imperative in an ageing population. That is why in our manifesto, the Government pledged to see 1 million more disabled people in work over the next 10 years. That is as much about preventing people from falling out of work as it is about supporting them into work, and it requires a comprehensive and wide-ranging programme of action.

Last year, we published "Improving Lives: The Work, Health and Disability Green Paper", which set out the Government's new and ambitious approach to the issue and marked the start of a new era in joint working between the welfare and health systems. Our 15-week consultation on the next 10 years of reform sought input from disabled people and those with health conditions, their families, employers and a range of stakeholders. The consultation was supported by 166 accessible events, and received around 6,000 responses. Today, we are publishing "Improving Lives: the Future of Work, Health and Disability", setting out our responses to the Green Paper consultation, as well as the next steps we will take to deliver our vision.

Changes in the nature of work, and more flexible working models, benefit a wider range of people, and new advances in technology offer more opportunities than ever before. For example, accessible hardware and software, and developments in apps and wearable technology, make it easier for employers to offer flexibility and adaptations to their staff. Small businesses and large employers alike are already implementing these solutions for their employees, and it is for Government to help set the direction and stimulate good ideas.

We know that the barriers to moving into work and staying in work are different for each person, depending on the nature of their health condition or disability,

their aspirations and their individual circumstances. We need to work directly with people who experience these barriers to identify solutions that will work. We want to build an approach that is responsive and caters for every scenario, with the individual at its heart.

The change needed is not one that the Government can deliver on their own. Across the country, there are striking examples of what can be achieved when employers, charities and healthcare professionals work together locally, but Government can help create the conditions for success.

In the workplace, employers should have the confidence to recruit and retain disabled people and those with health conditions, and to create healthy and inclusive workplaces where all employees can thrive and progress. The best employers have already realised the business benefits of hiring disabled people, and while there are many examples of good practice, we want to go further.

This Command Paper responds to what we heard in the consultation and to the findings of "Thriving at work: The Stevenson/Farmer review of mental health and employers". We will improve advice and support for employers of all sizes, working in partnership with them, together with disabled people and other stakeholders, to bring together information and advice that meet businesses' needs. We will also make significant enhancements to the Access to Work scheme, including by increasing the capacity of its mental health support service.

To support a key recommendation of the Stevenson/Farmer review, we will establish a voluntary framework approach for large employers to report on mental health and disability within their workforce. We are also preparing a consultation on changes to statutory sick pay, and we will run a cross-Government programme of analysis and research to examine the incentives and expectations that influence employers' decisions in this area. We will report back on the preliminary work next year.

We will build on the key role that the welfare system plays in supporting disabled people and those with health conditions to enter work where possible, by developing a more personalised and tailored approach to employment support. We will continue to learn, for example, through voluntary trials to help us build an effective offer of support that meets the needs of those in the support group. We will also continue to improve the assessment process, while building our evidence base, including by working with external stakeholders to take forward reform of the work capability assessment.

Health and care professionals are vital to supporting disabled people and those with health conditions to achieve their employment potential. We will work with and support health professionals with the tools and techniques they need to have supportive conversations with patients about work and health. We are doubling the number of work and health champions and investing about £39 million to more than double the number of employment advisers in improving access to psychological therapies services. We will also conduct large-scale randomised controlled trials delivering employment support in a health setting in the west midlands and the Sheffield city region, beginning by March 2018.

Alongside this Command Paper, I am also announcing the next steps for the Fit for Work service. Established in December 2014, it offers general health and work

advice to employees, employers and GPs through a phone line, a webchat service and a website. Since 2015 it has also provided occupational health assessments for employees at risk of long-term sickness absence, with advice on how they can be supported to return to work and remain in employment.

However, referrals of cases to the service by employers and GPs have been much lower than expected. For instance, there have been only 650 referrals a month in England and Wales, compared with the 34,000 forecast, and 100 a month in Scotland, compared with the estimated 4,200. By contrast, use of the advice line, webchats and Fit for Work website has exceeded expectations. I am therefore ending the contracts for the provision of the assessments service in England and Wales and in Scotland, while ensuring continued access to the Fit for Work online and phone services, which will continue to offer general health and work advice as well as support on sickness absence.

The Government are also announcing the appointment of an expert working group on occupational health to champion and drive a programme of work, taking an in-depth look at the sector.

To inform policy development, we have commissioned research to better understand current market supply and the delivery of occupational health provision. This research will look at local partnership models to integrate health and wider support, and it will report in 2019. We will also take account of the lessons from the Fit for Work service as we move forward.

The Government are laying the foundations for a 10-year programme of change. Everyone has their own part to play to achieve this ambitious vision of a society in which all disabled people and people with long-term health conditions are able to go as far as their talents will take them. I commend this statement to the House.

12.25 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Let me begin by giving apologies from the shadow Secretary of State, who is unable to be here today.

It is welcome that the Government have finally brought this statement before the House. We have waited years since the Work and Health programme was first proposed, with the Green Paper published a year ago and the consultation closing in February. The programme was initially supposed to be launched this autumn.

During the long wait, the Government have dropped the ambition to halve the disability employment gap by 2020. Sadly, today's statement reflects only the weaker ambition set out in their recent manifesto, reducing the number of disabled people they hope to support into work by up to half a million compared with their previous aims. We should not be surprised by this disappointment, as throughout the Government's seven wasted years of austerity, it is disabled people who, time and time again, have borne the brunt of their cuts.

The Work and Health programme is no different in this regard, with only £130 million a year set aside for its funding—a fraction of the billions spent on its predecessor, the Work programme. Indeed, the Local Government Association predicts that, with the current levels of funding, the programme can support only 110,000 claimants annually. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is, unfortunately, more pessimistic, estimating that around 65,000 will be supported under these plans.

That is the reason for the Government's strategy suddenly needing 10 years. They had promised to halve the disability employment gap by 2020; now it seems they promise to not halve it by 2027. The Government handing themselves an extended deadline to meet a weaker target will be very familiar to anyone who watched the Budget last week.

No doubt due to the Government's new, relaxed approach, today's announcement offers little in the way of commitments. It is, sadly, an attempt to kick the issue back into the long grass, with vague statements on pilots, a commitment from the Government to carry on doing what they are currently doing, and some minuscule sums for investment in training. This does not go nearly far enough.

There is a wealth of evidence about what support is necessary to deliver labour market outcomes for disabled people. Why do the Government need to do another round of pilots? We know, for example, that Access to Work is popular among those who use it, focused on the vital issue of retention for those in work, and effective in its results. Yet Inclusion London reports that, instead of expanding the scheme, the direction of travel from the Government has been to reduce the value of Access to Work packages. Will the Secretary of State commit now to expanding the funding for the programme as part of the wider Work and Health initiative, rather than simply saying that the Government will look at enhancements? The evidence has been available for years.

The statement instead praises the Government's existing Disability Confident programme, yet produces no evidence of concrete results from it. Can the Minister confirm how many additional disabled people have found work as a direct result of the programme? Can he also confirm how much Government money has been spent on Disability Confident per additional person employed as a result of the programme? I suspect he cannot. Once again, we see the Government talking a good game but delivering nothing beyond warm words.

Of course, we welcome the vague nod to a reformed statutory sick pay, although the devil will surely be in the detail of that announcement. Yet another consultation will have to keep us content for the time being. The Government clearly like to listen; it is taking action that they find much more difficult. When will the Secretary of State bring forward details of the consultation, including a timeline for action?

The Government propose to publish a report on local partnership and better integration of health and wider support, but we will have to wait until 2019 for it—two years into their 10-year strategy, and only a year before the 2020 deadline for halving the disability employment gap. That simply is not good enough.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you will remember that when the Government cut £1,500 a year from disabled people by slashing the employment and support allowance, that was justified as being for the sake of an effective Work and Health programme. Today's statement is clear evidence that they have broken that promise. I hope that Government Members will recognise that this is not what they were promised, and work with the Labour party to demand a stronger programme of support for disabled people. Should the Government be unable to deliver that, they should stand aside and let the Labour party get on with the job.

Mr Gauke: It is important that we all seek to remove barriers to work and to increase opportunities for disabled people to get into work. I think we should have a constructive debate on that shared objective, and I will take that contribution as a constructive contribution, even though it did not always sound quite like it.

May I pick up one or two points in what the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) said? Let us be clear: what has actually happened over the past four years is that the number of disabled people in work has increased by 600,000. To go now from 3.5 million disabled people in work to 4.5 million people in work over the course of the decade is an ambitious objective; it will require a great deal of work. I hope there can be a constructive debate in delivering that. I welcome the Mayor of London's remarks this morning, in the context of the Work and Health programme in London, in which he recognised what we have done and said it was time to put party politics aside on this matter. I hope that we can maintain that spirit across the board.

Let us remember what we are already delivering. The hon. Lady refers to Access to Work. Well, the budget of Access to Work—the expenditure of Access to Work—increased by 8% last year. We have in place the personal support package, helping people, where we are spending £330 million over the next four years. Let me be clear as to how we approach this. We recognise that there will be some disabled people and people with health conditions who will not be able to work, and we need to continue to support them—it is worth noting that we spend record amounts on benefits for disabled people. However, there are also very many people who want to work, and we are determined to do everything we can to support them, whether that is by using our capabilities in the welfare system and the health system or working with employers, because we want to put work at the centre of this.

Work matters. It should be at the heart of what we do in delivering a welfare system. That is exactly what this Government do across the board. I can draw a parallel with our debates last week about universal credit, which helps people into work. That is the approach that we are delivering, and I hope at some point we can have the support of the Labour party in achieving that objective.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): May I first welcome this 10-year plan? I am delighted that the Secretary of State and the Department continue to focus on this area. He knows that I have campaigned for many years to improve the life chances of people with autism, but sadly still only 16% of adults with autism are in full-time employment, and only 32% in full-time or part-time employment, and that percentage has not really shifted much in a decade. I pay tribute to the Secretary of State for International Development, to whom I presented, on 21 February, when she was a Work and Pensions Minister, a cross-party petition, signed by 30,000 people, about the autism employment gap. Can he give me an assurance that he will continue to focus on the needs of people with autism and close that gap once and for all?

Mr Gauke: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question and pay tribute to the work that she does on autism, including the work that she has done for many years now as chair of the all-party autism group. Yesterday

she published a very good report on the issue and we are studying its contents closely. She highlights this issue. That is the challenge: we have made progress across the board, but is there more to do? Absolutely; there is more to do. She highlights the employment gap for those with autism. That is something that we do have to address as a society.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance notice of the statement.

The SNP is extremely disappointed in the statement and the Command Paper that have been produced today. We believe that the UK Government, as a priority, need to reverse the cuts they have made to these benefits and need to scrap the freeze on benefits, because they are harming people.

Mencap has released a statement that says:

“We are alarmed that the needs of hundreds of thousands of people with mild or moderate learning disabilities have been overlooked.”

The Government seem to have abandoned their pledge to halve the disability employment gap, and the gap is even worse for those people who have learning disabilities.

The Disability Benefits Consortium has said:

“We are extremely disappointed that they have chosen to focus on the design of ESA, instead of the broken Work Capability Assessment.”

Sixty-eight per cent. of those challenging their work capability assessment results are successful in that challenge. The system is discredited and broken. We want to see the UK Government committing to scrapping the work capability assessment. We want to see them committed to putting in a new system that puts fairness, dignity and respect for disabled people at the absolute heart of the system.

Mr Gauke: First, in response to the hon. Lady's comments on behalf of the SNP, I know that the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), has spoken to Scottish Government Ministers today and got a much more constructive response. It is the launch of the innovation fund for the Dundee gateway today and we look forward to working closely with the Scottish Government in a constructive manner.

We have consulted on the work capability assessment. It is not clear that there is consensus at this point as to the way in which the work capability assessment should be reformed, but we acknowledge that there are improvements that should be made. We have indeed made improvements in how the work capability assessment works; for example, those with severe long-term disabilities will not be reassessed in the way that they were previously. So we continue to make improvements on that. If we can reach consensus on the way in which the work capability assessment should be reformed, I will be happy to proceed with that.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I strongly welcome the statement that the Secretary of State has made this afternoon. I also welcome the news that the disability employment rate has risen by nearly 5% since 2014. The Government are obviously a major employer of people. What are the Government doing to ensure that the civil service leads by example in this area?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The Government are a large employer. I am pleased to say that all Government Departments are Disability Confident employers. One of the points that we make in the Command Paper is that, as an employer, it is important that the civil service leads by example in terms of how it operates and the support that is provided to disabled people.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his statement and welcome the passage in which it sounds as though he will introduce significant improvements to the Access to Work programme. Does that include abolishing or raising the cap on support for deaf people that was introduced in March 2015?

Mr Gauke: We continue to review that matter. We have certainly received representations on that point, and we continue to look at the evidence.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): My father was made disabled at work. When that happens to someone, it can really affect their life chances. I congratulate Microlink, a company in Chandler's Ford that has been going for more than 23 years, which enables people with certain conditions and disabilities to get back into education or employment by helping them with the challenges that they face. Will the Secretary of State undertake to listen to such companies, which do so much to keep people in work and education and give them opportunities at every point in life?

Mr Gauke: I praise the employer in my hon. Friend's constituency. Very good employers lead the way. There are now 5,000 employers signed up to the Disability Confident scheme, and we want to ensure that the best practice that is pursued by many employers is pursued by all employers.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Secretary of State will be aware of evidence presented to the Select Committee about individuals' frustration with the Minicom service and text relay operators. It is not acceptable for people to wait 45 or 50 minutes to access those services, or to be hung up on. Can he assure me that the Minicom service and text relay operators will be adequately staffed?

Mr Gauke: We are always looking at what we can do to improve the service that is provided. When the standard falls below an acceptable level, something clearly needs to be rectified.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the statement. I am sure the Secretary of State agrees that, particularly when it comes to mental health, we need to tackle the taboos that may prevent people from accessing help when they first think that there may be an issue. Will he make that a key part of his strategy, to help to keep people in work and make employers more confident about employing people who have a history of mental health issues?

Mr Gauke: There has clearly been a very welcome change in attitudes in respect of mental health in recent years. We need that sort of cultural shift more broadly

in the recognition and understanding of disabilities or health conditions that may have held people back in the past, but can be dealt with and accommodated. Employers can take steps and put in place adaptations to enable people to continue to work, as the Command Paper argues strongly.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State start a specific job of work looking at support for people with acquired brain injuries, whether they result from concussion in sport, which might lead to chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or from other injuries sustained in, for example, a car accident? The truth of the matter is that we do not have anywhere near enough rehabilitation units around the country. Rehabilitation can get people right the way to cure and get them back into work, and it is immensely cost-effective for the Government. I urge him to meet the brand new all-party group on acquired brain injury, which I chair, and to look specifically at this job of work so that we can get those people the real-life opportunities that they need.

Mr Gauke: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and I know that the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work is particularly keen to meet him in his capacity as chair of the all-party group to discuss the issue further.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I wonder whether the Minister or other Members watched the programme "Employable Me" on BBC2 the other night. When I watched it, I was struck by the courage of the disabled people who were very keen to get back into work but faced insuperable challenges, and by the enlightened employers who gave them a chance. It demonstrated the life-enhancing power of work for people who make a positive choice to work and who are supported. Will the Minister think about how difficult it is for small businesses and charities, which featured in the programme, to give the right support? Will he tell us how this welcome statement will make that go further?

Mr Gauke: I confess that I have not had the opportunity to see the programme that my hon. Friend mentioned, but she is not the first person to recommend it strongly to me. I will perhaps endeavour to watch it over the weekend. She raises an important point about small businesses. We need to help small businesses to find the best way of providing support to disabled people. That will give small businesses access to people who, as I understand the programme demonstrates, have significant ability, are very talented and could bring a lot to the labour market, but who have not had the opportunities that they should have had, partly because of attitudes, culture and so on.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I note that the statement mentioned taking forward reform of the work capability assessment. I have certainly found that to be a major issue in my constituency case load. I think of Jean Birrell, my Fullarton Park constituent, who was treated really quite poorly in the work capability assessment process. May I ask the Secretary of State when he last sat in on a work capability assessment?

Mr Gauke: I have not done so, but we have made reforms to the work capability assessment process. As I said earlier, those with severe disabilities no longer need

[Mr Gauke]

to be reassessed in the same way. I have dealt with the matter as a constituency Member of Parliament, and I recognise the concerns that exist. I also recognise that there is not, as yet, a consensus on exactly how the work capability assessment should be reformed.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): In welcoming the Secretary of State's statement about helping more people with health conditions back into work, may I ask what is being done to enhance the Jobcentre Plus offer, specifically in relation to helping people who have mental health issues and learning disabilities with universal credit applications?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We have 300 disability employment advisers in place. I have met them and discussed their work, and I am struck by the specialist support that they can provide. We are also putting in place 200 community partners to assist further on the matter. We are trying to ensure that Jobcentre Plus is well placed to provide the support that people need.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Are we in danger of setting a very dangerous precedent, whereby constituents who are in possession of a sick note from a health professional—whether that be a consultant, a doctor or perhaps a psychiatrist—have it overridden by the work assessors, who declare them fit for work? I had a disabled constituent visit me just two weeks ago; her disability is clear for all to see. She was asked how she did her shopping, and she said that she did it online every couple of weeks. She was told that she was therefore fit to work in an office for 37 hours a week.

Mr Gauke: Whether we are looking at ESA or PIP, the percentage of assessments that are overturned on appeal is running at about 4%. I would rather it were lower, but let us put it in context.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Today's Command Paper is a huge step forward, and it should be welcomed. When it comes to attitudes, does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to tackle the culture, in some quarters, of failure to harness disabled people's potential in the workplace?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I come back to the point about the need for a culture shift. The Government have an important role to play in making the case for that, and I am determined that we will do so.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The timely payment of PIP is an important support for disabled people, whether they are in work or not. My constituent Margaret has had two strokes, and she had to make a 70-mile round trip for a PIP assessment with her daughter, who had taken a day off work. Her meeting was cancelled on the day she turned up, despite the fact that she had received written confirmation, and there was no record on the DWP system. Will the Secretary of State investigate the growing problem of PIP appointments being cancelled because of a lack of resources, and the impact that it has on disabled people in the highlands and elsewhere?

Mr Gauke: Clearly, what happened in that particular case was unacceptable, and we need to address those issues. When it comes to delays in payment of PIP and assessments of PIP, we have made progress in the last couple of years or so, but we need to continue to ensure that the standard is adequate.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): How does the Secretary of State react to the fact that Lord Shinkwin, an applicant for the post of disability commissioner, complained last week that he believes the post is about to be downgraded or abolished? Lord Shinkwin is a magnificent example and role model of someone who has overcome a severe disability. How does the Secretary of State react to a visible defect in the Government's failure to act on a complaint I made some years ago about a constituent working in the civil service whose career came to an end because he could not get wheelchair access to the Box in the corner of the Chamber?

Mr Gauke: I was not aware of the latter case, but the hon. Gentleman raises an important point. I agree with him that Lord Shinkwin is a great example. My understanding is that that decision is for the commissioners of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, without any ministerial interference as to whether there is a particular disability commissioner role. That is my understanding of the situation.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for the important work on this issue that has been done by his Department with the all-party group on disability, which I chair. A clear recommendation from our inquiry report is that a significant improvement could be made in employment if we leveraged public procurement contracts towards Disability Confident employers. Will he consider that further, and write to the all-party group with his thoughts?

Mr Gauke: First, I thank the hon. Lady for the work she does with the all-party group, and for her kind words about its engagement with my Department. She raises an interesting point about procurement. She will be aware that, when it comes to procurement issues, Departments and sectors very often have different asks, and the Cabinet Office obviously has to take a view. However, we are considering the issue, and I encourage all major companies, particularly those that have engagements with the Government, to look very carefully at what being a Disability Confident employer involves.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State update the House on the progress made for people damaged by the state when they received contaminated blood products during the contaminated blood scandal, particularly in relation to passporting benefits to them so that they do not keep having to go through regular assessments?

Mr Gauke: If I may, I am happy to look at that particular issue and write to the hon. Lady.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent Jade Minto suffered mental health problems and had to give up her work, but she subsequently gained a qualification to enable her to work in the care

sector and has been offered a job. That sounds like a good news story, except for the fact that she is on ESA and allowed to work only a maximum of 16 hours of week, and the DWP will not allow her to take up the position because she needs to do an internal training programme that would take her over the threshold of 16 hours a week. Will the Government look at ending this crazy situation?

Mr Gauke: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that case. I agree that that does not in any way sound like a sensible situation. The good news I can give him is that such a situation will not happen once universal credit is brought in.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): One of the major concerns of disabled people in my constituency is about the impact of universal credit. I note that in the right hon. Gentleman's statement last week, he postponed the roll-out of universal credit in his constituency and those of the Prime Minister and the First Secretary of State. As he is in the mood to reconsider the policy, will he do the same and pause the roll-out of universal credit for the people of Barnsley East?

Mr Gauke: The previous question provided an example of how universal credit will actually be much better for disabled people. We are rolling out universal credit in a way that is safe, and we are making adjustments as and when we need to, but I am pleased to say that the date on which universal credit will be fully rolled out remains unchanged—March 2022. If it could be earlier, I would make it earlier, but that is the safest point at which we can do it. As I have said, universal credit will be an advantage for many disadvantaged people, because they will not be faced with some of the current disincentives, such as not working more than 16 hours a week.

Point of Order

12.54 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. At the Health Committee session on 31 October, I asked the Health Secretary whether he had visited a locked mental health rehabilitation ward—such wards are currently home to over 3,500 patients across our country—and he answered yes. Over three weeks ago, I followed that up with a named day parliamentary question to ask the Secretary of State which ward he had visited and when. The answer I received said:

“The information is not held in the format requested.”

I therefore tabled a subsequent named day parliamentary question, this time just asking which locked mental health rehabilitation ward the Secretary of State had visited. The answer I received the other day stated that “the Secretary of State has visited a wide range of mental health facilities including 15 since July 2016, however the information requested is not held.”

Is it in order for the Secretary of State not to disclose to a Member of Parliament details of a visit that he confirmed to the Select Committee he had made; and if not, what advice will you offer me as to how I may solicit this very important information from the Secretary of State?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I cannot comment directly on the adequacy or otherwise of ministerial responses, but the hon. Lady has clearly raised her concerns about this issue and Government Front Benchers will have heard what she said. My best advice is that the hon. Lady should consult the Table Office about other ways in which she can raise this issue—perhaps in a short debate, and certainly at Health questions.

Yemen

Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

12.56 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the current situation in Yemen.

I am extremely grateful to Mr Speaker for granting this debate. There is rapidly rising concern in Britain about what is happening in Yemen and the part that Britain is playing in this crisis. There is deep concern that an almighty catastrophe of biblical proportions is unfolding in Yemen before our eyes, and a considerable fear that Britain is dangerously complicit in it.

I had the opportunity, thanks to Oxfam and the United Nations, to visit Yemen early this year, and I am most grateful to the Saudi Arabian authorities for facilitating that visit. I think I remain the only European politician to have visited Sana'a and the northern part of Yemen in the past three years. I want to pay tribute to the extraordinary work that the humanitarian agencies and the UN are carrying out, particularly the work that Jamie McGoldrick and his team at the UN are so brilliantly doing in almost impossible circumstances.

I returned from Yemen deeply concerned at what I had learned and seen, and I expressed my concern to both the Foreign Office and the British Government privately, and to the Saudi authorities, courtesy of His Excellency the Saudi Arabian ambassador. I regard myself as a friend of Saudi Arabia, albeit a candid one. Like many, I have great respect for the domestic reforms and modernisation currently in progress in the kingdom, which are being led by the Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman.

My visit to Yemen enabled me both to spend time with the humanitarian agencies and to meet the Houthi leadership, the former President of Yemen Ali Abdullah Saleh and those currently leading what is the largest political party in Yemeni politics, the General People's Congress.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this debate, and I join him, as I am sure the whole House does, in offering our thanks to the humanitarian workers. Does he agree that although the roots of this terrible war are deep and complex, there is absolutely no justification whatsoever for repeated blockades of the ports and the airports? The blockades are denying the long-suffering people of Yemen the food and medicine that they require, and as a result they are suffering grievously. There is a threat of famine, and people are dying of diseases, including cholera.

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman is right in every syllable of every word that he has just said. I hope to set out both the extent of the problems that he has identified and what I think the British Government can do to assist in their resolution.

I was talking about those I met when I was in Yemen and about the Houthis. There is an idea that persists that Yemen has been captured by a few thousand terrorists of Houthi origin who have stolen the country. This analysis is not only wrong; it is an extremely dangerous

fiction. The Houthis are in complete control of large parts of the country, and together with their allies, the GPC, have established a strong and orderly Government in the north, particularly throughout the capital city of Yemen, Sana'a. They will not be easily shifted. The Houthis commit grave violations against the civilian population too, including forced disappearances and siphoning vital resources from public services to fund violence. But for most people in Sana'a, the only violence and disorder that they experience is that which rains down on them from the skies night after night from Saudi aircraft.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for securing the debate and for giving way.

A recent BBC documentary showed the Houthis in Sana'a putting posters up everywhere, sacking all the Sunni clerics from the mosques and putting Shia clerics in. The poster slogans and the chants in the mosques were "Death to America", "Death to Israel" and "Curse on the Jews". Does the right hon. Gentleman think that that is right and progressive and that the Houthis represent a peaceful way forward?

Mr Mitchell: The point I have just been making is that the Houthis are responsible for violence and for disappearances. In the few sentences before I gave way to him, I was making clear precisely what the position is in respect of the Houthis. The fact is that they are in control of large parts of Yemen and they will not be easily shifted.

During my visit, I was also able to travel to Sa'ada in the north, which has been largely destroyed. Posters in the city in Arabic and English say that Yemeni children are being killed by the British and Americans. No fewer than 25 humanitarian agencies wrote to the Foreign Secretary on 13 November. In my many years of working with humanitarian organisations, I have seldom seen such a clear, convincing and utterly united approach from so many of our world-leading NGOs and charities.

I want to be clear about the situation on the ground as of last night. The position is as follows. Some humanitarian flights into Sana'a resumed on 26 November following the intensification of the blockade imposed on 5 November. Some limited shipments are coming into Hodeidah, Yemen's principal port, and Saleef, but very small amounts. Two initial shipments to those ports have brought just 30,000 metric tonnes of commercial wheat—less than 10% of what Yemen needs a month to keep its population alive—and 300,000 metric tonnes of wheat was turned away in the first two weeks of the blockade. This morning three vessels loaded with food are outside Hodeidah awaiting permission from the Saudi authorities to enter.

One humanitarian air cargo flight landed last weekend with 1.9 million doses of diphtheria vaccine. These vaccines will help contain the current outbreak of diphtheria—a disease known as the strangling angel of children; a disease that we no longer see in Britain and Europe and which since August has produced more than 170 suspected cases and at least 14 deaths so far.

There has been no access for fuel. Fuel is critical to the milling and trucking of food to vulnerable people in need as well as the ongoing operation of health, water and sewerage systems. Humanitarian agencies need at a

minimum 1,000,000 litres of fuel each month. Without fuel, hospitals are shutting down due to lack of power and water. At least seven whole cities have run out of clean water and sanitation and aid agencies are unable to get food to starving families. The destruction of clean water and sanitation facilities is directly responsible for the outbreak earlier this year of cholera affecting nearly 1 million people.

To summarise, the effect and impact of the blockade could not be graver. Yemen is a country ravaged by medieval diseases and on the precipice of famine. With rapidly dwindling food and fuel stocks and the dire humanitarian situation pushing at least 7 million people into famine, it is now vital that there is unimpeded access for both humanitarian and commercial cargo to enter Hodeidah and Saleef, including those carrying fuel. Approximately 21 million Yemenis today stand in need of humanitarian assistance, but to be clear, humanitarian aid alone is not enough to meet the needs of the entire country. Without access for critical commercial goods, the likelihood of famine and a renewed spike of cholera remain. The international humanitarian agencies are doing their best to support around 7 million people, but the rest of the population rely on the commercial sector and the lack of food and fuel is causing desperate problems, with price hikes over 100% in costs for essential commodities.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for drawing breath and giving way. He is right to identify and highlight the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. He does that cause no service by glossing over the causes of the situation, particularly the Iranian-backed Houthi rebellion, with the violence that has accompanied it. Many of my constituents whose families are still in Aden are terrified by the prospect of the Houthis taking over. Does he acknowledge that the Government of Yemen are internationally recognised and are being supported by the Saudi-led coalition? Can we have a bit of balance on the causes of this event?

Mr Mitchell: If we are able to detain the right hon. Gentleman for the rest of my remarks, I will directly address many of the points that he has made.

The Saudi pledge to open some ports for urgent humanitarian supplies does not come close to feeding a population reliant on commercial imports for 80% of its food. The best analogy for Hodeidah is the equivalent of the port of London; 80% of all that Yemeni's eat is imported and 70% comes through Hodeidah Port. As the UN Secretary General said last week:

"the flour milling capacity of Hodeida and Saleef Ports and their proximity to 70% of people in need makes them indispensable to the survival of Yemen. ... Unless the blockade on these Ports is lifted famine throughout Yemen is a very real threat including on the southern border of Saudi Arabia".

So the recent Saudi proposal in respect of opening other ports completely misses the point. No one should accept the Saudis' minor concessions on humanitarian access as a victory. Allowing some UN flights to land and ships to dock does not constitute the unhindered humanitarian access that Saudi Arabia is required to provide under international humanitarian law. Humanitarian cargo alone will not avert a famine in Yemen. All it will do is slow the inevitable descent into disease and starvation for millions of Yemenis.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I was under the impression that the Government had opened the ports, including Hodeidah, but that the rebels still have not opened ports. Obviously, we want all the ports in Yemen to be opened as fast as possible. Right now, my understanding is that the Government and the Saudis have opened up the ports that they control. Am I wrong?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is partially wrong. The two critical ports are Hodeidah and Saleef, for the reasons that I have explained. Shipping is not being allowed to enter those ports in an unfettered way.

I want to be very clear about this. Humanitarian support without commercial imports coming into the country—especially food, fuel and medicine—will condemn millions of Yemenis to certain death. So what does this mean on the ground? Every hour 27 children are diagnosed as acutely malnourished. That is 600 more starving children every day. According to the World Food Programme, as things stand, 150,000 malnourished children could starve to death in the coming months and 17 million people do not know from where their next meal is coming. As of today, at least 400,000 children are suffering from severe acute malnutrition, as medically defined.

When children have severe malnutrition, they reach a critical point at which they are no longer able to eat for themselves and need to be fed by naso-gastric tubes. Prior to that point, we can assist them: we can revive them quickly with nutritional biscuits such as Plumpy'Nut at a cost of a few pence per child. But once they are so starved of nutrition that they require medical assistance and their organs begin to fail, they cannot play and they cannot smile. Parents have to be told that their children still love them, but they are just too weak to show it.

I repeat that malnutrition in Yemen today is threatening the lives of hundreds of thousands of children. The imagery on our television screens, captured by only the most intrepid of journalists due to Saudi restrictions on media access, seem to be from a bygone era—emaciated children and tiny babies in incubators, their tenuous hold on life dependent on fuel for hospital generators that is fast running out. Nawal al-Maghafi's award-winning reporting for the BBC showed shocking and heart-breaking images of famine and shattering health systems, even before the current blockade.

Graham P. Jones: The right hon. Gentleman says that there are limitations on journalism, but actually al-Jazeera has a lot of access and does not report the Saudi position favourably to the world. We have only to go on YouTube to see an awful lot of modern media from inside north Yemen and Sana'a—and from Saudi Arabia, where Houthis regularly kill Saudi people.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman will, however, accept that where a blockade specifically targets journalists to stop them from coming in, it is reasonable to assume that the regime in control has something to hide, which it does not want journalists to see. After all, if there were nothing to hide, presumably journalists would be allowed access.

The 25 humanitarian agencies that wrote to the Foreign Secretary on 13 November did so because Britain is part of a coalition that is blockading and attacking

[Mr Mitchell]

Yemen. As the pen holder on Yemen at the United Nations, we are responsible for leading action at the Security Council. We bear a special responsibility—physical, as well as moral—to lead the international response to end this conflict. Yet our Government have declined to call this what it is: an illegal blockade. Saudi Arabia is in direct violation of humanitarian law and specifically in breach of Security Council resolution 2216, which

“urges all parties to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance, as well as rapid, safe and unhindered access for humanitarian actors to reach people in need of humanitarian assistance, including medical assistance”.

That is what the resolution says—it could hardly be clearer. The Security Council resolution was initiated and drafted by the UK in 2015. The British Government were right to condemn the attempted Houthi missile attack on Riyadh airport, as the Minister for the Middle East did in the House last week, but where is the British condemnation of the 1,000 days of intensive Saudi bombing of Yemen?

On each of the three nights I spent in Sana’a earlier this year, there were six bombing runs by the Saudi airforce attacking the city. I was in no danger whatever, as I was safe with the United Nations, but imagine the fear and horror of families and children who night after night are the subject of crude bombing attacks, which most usually destroy civilian and non-military targets. Throughout this conflict our “quiet diplomacy” has failed to curb outrage after outrage perpetrated by our allies as they destroy bridges, roads and hospitals. No wonder the UN Secretary-General has called this a “stupid” war.

Despite holding the pen at the UN Security Council, the UK has so far failed to take any steps whatever to use it to respond to the recent escalation. We have not condemned the illegal restrictions on humanitarian aid and vital imports of food, fuel and medicines. We have not called for parties to end violations against civilians or to set out a revitalised peace process given the political stalemate and the widespread recognition that resolution 2216 constitutes a barrier to a realistic political process. The UK did not even dissent from a draft UN Security Council statement, circulated by Egypt, that failed entirely to mention the dire impact of the blockade. This silence is shameful: it not only lets down the Yemenis, but threatens our position on the UN Security Council as other nations fill the void left by our abdication of leadership.

The senseless death of millions is not the only risk. By tightening the noose around a starving nation, Saudi Arabia is fuelling the propaganda machines of the very opponents it wishes to vanquish. More than collective punishment of the Yemenis, this is self-harm on a grand scale.

When I went to Sa’dah, I visited a school that had been bombed by the Saudi air force. Children were being taught in tents and with textbooks largely financed by the British taxpayer. On my arrival, the children started chanting in much the same way as children in our primary schools declaim nursery rhymes. On inquiring of the translator what they were saying, I was told they were chanting, “Death to the Saudis and Americans!” In deference to my visit, they had omitted from their chanting the third country on their list.

Far from helping to make Saudi Arabia’s borders safer and diminishing the threat of international terrorism, we are radicalising an entire generation of Yemeni young people, whose hatred of us for what we are doing to them and their country may well translate into a potent recruitment tool for international terrorists. Every action of the Saudis currently bolsters and serves the narrative of Saudi Arabia’s enemies, who want Saudi Arabia to be seen as the aggressor so that they win the support of the general population.

Graham P. Jones *rose*—

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Mitchell: I give way to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who leads the all-party group on Yemen.

Keith Vaz: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. He was present at the meeting earlier this week when we heard from the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister, who said that the Saudi Arabian Government do not believe that this war can be won. What is the point of continuing with a war that cannot be won?

Mr Mitchell: Well, I will now turn directly to the position of Saudi Arabia, whose impressive Foreign Minister, Ahmed al-Jubeir, generously came to the House of Commons on Tuesday this week to speak to the all-party group, as the right hon. Gentleman has just said. During the course of the conversation, during which the right hon. Gentleman and I were pretty forthright, he asked for advice, making it clear that Saudi Arabia had not fought a war of this nature before.

My advice is as follows: there must be an immediate end to this appalling blockade. Of course, working with the UN, the Saudis are within their rights to search shipping and other transport for illicit weapons, but they cannot impound or obstruct vessels carrying vital food and medical supplies. Currently, the Saudis are refusing to allow 26 ships that have been cleared by the UN to be offloaded. If the Saudis have doubts about the effectiveness of UN inspection, they must of course be part of it.

There must be an immediate ceasefire and a return to reinvigorated, inclusive peace talks. A new Security Council resolution is long overdue. It is widely recognised that resolution 2216 is an anachronism that constitutes a barrier to any peace process. There can be no preconditions from either side. The Houthis and the General People’s Congress are in control of Sana’a; they will not be easily shifted—certainly not by an air campaign that day after day consolidates support for them on the ground and directs the hatred of the local population to those who are dropping the bombs.

The Houthis did not start out as allies of the Iranians; the Houthis are Zaidis, not Shi’a. But of course in a region where “my enemy’s enemy is my friend”, it is not hard to understand why the Houthis look to Iran, although, given the blockade, it is not easy for Iran to arm the Houthis in any significant way. The prolonging of the conflict and the resulting cost to Saudi Arabia in regional instability is a gift to Iran.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an extremely powerful point about the nature of Iran's arming of the Houthis. Does he not, however, accept the research by Conflict Armament Research that clearly points out that weapons from Iran have come through Yemen and are now being used against Saudi Arabia? He makes the absolutely valid point that Saudi action is only further encouraging such violence, but does he not also accept that Tehran is wilfully undermining and destroying an Arab state to use it as a proxy against Saudi Arabia?

Mr Mitchell: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend that blockading weapons—from any country, but certainly from Iran—is the right thing to do, but I am condemning without reservation a blockade that is likely to lead to the famine and death of very large numbers of people.

The price for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia of continuing on its current path will be certain failure and utter humiliation, both in the region and more widely. The clock is ticking. Already in Yemen a child dies every 10 minutes. Yemen is a time bomb threatening international peace and security. Our failure to denounce these crimes and use our leverage to stop them condemns millions of Yemenis to death in the future. Shying away from demanding compliance, by all, with the international rules-based order that we in Britain helped to take root also weakens a strained system that keeps British citizens safe.

Britain's policy is riddled with internal inconsistencies. While one limb of the British Government is desperately trying to secure entry into the port of Hodeidah for vital food, medicine and fuel, another limb is assisting with the blockade and, indeed, the targeting of attacks. One limb supports the erection of seven new cranes that are vital for unloading essential supplies, while another supports the destruction of those same cranes.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): My right hon. Friend is doing an excellent job in explaining some of the background to the conflict, but I will not have him stand in the House of Commons and say that the British Government are involved in the targeting of weaponry being used by the coalition. That is just not true, and I would like him to withdraw it.

Mr Mitchell: If my right hon. Friend will give me an undertaking that it is totally untrue that any serving British officer has been engaged with the targeting centre in Riyadh, or in any other part of Saudi Arabia, to try to assist in ensuring that the targeting is better, I will of course withdraw my remark.

Alistair Burt: British personnel are there to observe what is happening in relation to international humanitarian law, so that they can be part of the process of ensuring that it is adhered to. They are not part of the operational process. They are not under command to do that or anything else. They are not taking part in the targeting or anything like it, and have not been so.

Mr Mitchell: I want to be absolutely clear about what my right hon. Friend is telling the House of Commons today. There is no question of any serving British officer being engaged in instructing and assisting

—certainly to ensure that international humanitarian law is observed—with the programme of targeting that is being carried out by the Saudi air force?

Alistair Burt: No.

Mr Mitchell: If my right hon. Friend gives me such an undertaking, I am happy to withdraw that very specific point.

I have never called for an arms embargo on Saudi Arabia, because the kingdom is surrounded by enemies and is wealthy. Saudi Arabia is absolutely entitled to defend itself, and we as its friend and ally are entitled to sell it weapons as long as we do so in accordance with one of the strictest licensing regimes in the world. We may also have some influence that we could exercise to ensure that weapons are used in accordance with the rules of war. I cannot help observing, however, that British munitions are causing destruction and misery in Yemen that the other limb of the British Government, to which I referred earlier, is seeking to staunch through aid and assistance paid for by the British taxpayer.

I have no doubt that, during her current visit to the middle east, the Prime Minister will use every political, economic and security argument available to her to persuade the Saudis of the moral and strategic failure that they are pursuing in Yemen. I profoundly hope that the lifting of the blockade on Yemen will be the No. 1 priority on her visit. We must use every inch of our leverage—diplomatic, political and economic—to demonstrate to our allies that they have more to gain from peace than from a fruitless military strategy that is exacerbating the world's largest humanitarian catastrophe and undermining the international rules-based order that keeps us all safe.

Hilary Benn: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way to me again. On the question of arms sales, given that the final report of the United Nations panel of experts on Yemen found that the coalition had conducted airstrikes in violation of international humanitarian law, and given the consolidated criteria—the rules governing arms sales from the United Kingdom—is there not a bit of a problem if the UK Government do not pause their sales, which is what I called for, along with the Leader of the Opposition, when I was shadow Foreign Secretary, since we have an obligation to see those claims investigated? Otherwise, is there not a risk that the sales will be in breach of our own law?

Mr Mitchell: I agree that it is important for these incidents to be investigated, and investigated impartially, because otherwise the investigation will carry no credence.

I have completed the speech that I intended to make, but I think it worth adding that I have steered away from a debate on an arms embargo, because I think it would have taken our eye off the critical ball. We must see an end to this blockade, for humanitarian reasons and for reasons of international humanitarian law.

1.25 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I am grateful to Mr Speaker for granting the debate, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on securing it. His speech was nothing less than a tour de force, and I congratulate him on that as well—and I mean it.

[Emily Thornberry]

We are talking about what has been widely recognised to be the world's biggest humanitarian crisis, and it is threatening to become one of the worst such crises for decades. In those circumstances, an emergency debate is more than appropriate. It is regrettable in many ways that the House is not packed today. On too many occasions the war in Yemen has been described as a forgotten war, and indeed it is. The role that we play in it is important, and needs to be more widely acknowledged.

It is welcome that, since the Minister's statement on the crisis 10 days ago, we have seen a partial easing of the blockade of Yemen's ports and airports to allow some consignments of food and medical supplies to be brought into rebel-held areas, but, as the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield said, it is not nearly enough to address the scale of the humanitarian needs. Hundreds of thousands of entirely innocent children still face death over the coming weeks owing to malnutrition and disease. If they do not receive the food, clean water and medical supplies that they need in order to survive, and receive them in the long-term quantities that are required, we know what will happen.

If those children are to obtain the relief that they need, all parties must be willing to do whatever it takes, including the complete cessation of violence, the full lifting of the blockades, the opening of humanitarian corridors over land, and a guarantee of safe passage for aid convoys. I hope that the Minister will be able to update us today on what is being done to achieve those ends.

We all understand the backdrop to the current crisis. We understand the anger of the Saudi Government at the firing of a ballistic missile at their own country by the Houthi rebels on 4 November. That was an act that all Opposition Members unequivocally condemn, just as we condemn the Saudi airstrike on 1 November which killed 31 people, including six children, at a market in the Sahar district of Sa'ada. Both sides are guilty of attacking civilians, both sides should be equally condemned for doing so, and, in due course, both sides should be held to account for any violations of international humanitarian law.

Following the Houthi missile strike, the Saudis strengthened their blockade of all rebel-held areas of Yemen. As a result, what little supplies there were of food, medicine and other humanitarian goods were choked off for at least three weeks, and remain just an inadequate trickle today. The damage that will have been done to millions of children who were already facing severe malnutrition, a cholera epidemic and an outbreak of diphtheria, will, as the UN has said, be measured in the lives that are lost. As the World Health Organisation, the World Food Programme and UNICEF have stated, the tightening of the blockade has made "an already catastrophic situation far worse."

They concluded:

"To deprive this many from the basic means of survival is an unconscionable act and a violation of humanitarian principles and law."

In that context, I must go back to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) 10 days ago: how do the Government view this month's blockade as compatible

with international humanitarian law, a body of law that clearly states that starvation of civilian populations cannot be used as a weapon of war and any blockades established for military purposes must allow civilian populations access to the food and other essential supplies that they need to live?

Graham P. Jones: The situation in Yemen is of course terrible and catastrophic, but does my right hon. Friend not agree that the main reason for that is the collapse of the economic system within Yemen?

Emily Thornberry: However we got here, it cannot be made better by there being a blockade and millions of starving children. It is my view—and I believe the view of this House—that the blockade should be lifted and that we must find a peace process and a way of moving the sides apart to allow these children to survive over the winter.

When a tactic of surrender or survive was used by President Assad in Syria, the Foreign Secretary was happy to condemn it, but he has uttered not a single word of criticism when the same tactic has been used by his friend Crown Prince Salman of Saudi Arabia, the architect of the Yemen conflict, or, as the Foreign Secretary likes to call him, "a remarkable young man." So let me ask the Minister this specifically: while the blockade was fully in place over the past three weeks, apparently in clear breach of international humanitarian law, were any export licences granted for the sale of arms from the UK to the Saudi-led coalition?

When my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East raised this issue last week, the Minister seemed to suggest that the blockade was justified from a military point of view because of the alleged smuggling of missiles from Iran to the Houthi rebels. But I ask him again why he disagrees with the confidential briefing prepared by the panel of experts appointed by the UN Security Council and circulated on 10 November. That briefing has been referred to already, but let me quote from it:

"The panel finds that imposition of access restrictions is another attempt by the Saudi Arabia-led coalition to use...resolution 2216 as justification for obstructing the delivery of commodities that are essentially civilian in nature."

It goes on to say that, while the Houthis undoubtedly possess some ballistic missile capacity:

"The panel has seen no evidence to support claims of"

ballistic missiles

"having been transferred to the Houthi-Saleh alliance from external sources".

If the Minister disagrees with that assessment, which I understand he does, can he state the evidence on which he does so, and will he undertake to share that evidence with the UN panel of experts? However, if there is no such evidence, I ask him again: how can the blockade be justified from the perspective of international humanitarian law, and how can the Government justify selling Saudi Arabia the arms that were used to enforce that blockade?

We know that, even if the blockade of Yemen's ports is permanently lifted, the civilian population of Yemen will continue to suffer as long as this conflict carries on, and the only way that suffering will finally end is through a lasting ceasefire and political agreement. As the whole House knows, it is the UK's ordained role to

act as the penholder for a UN ceasefire resolution on Yemen. That is a matter I have raised many times in this House, and I raise it again today. It has now been one year and one month since Britain's ambassador to the United Nations, Matthew Rycroft, circulated Britain's draft resolution to other members of the UN Security Council, and this is what he said back then:

"We have decided...to put forward a draft Security Council resolution...calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities and a resumption of the political process."

That was a year and a month ago, and still no resolution has been presented. That is one year and one month when no progress has been made towards peace, and when the conflict has continued to escalate and the humanitarian crisis has become the worst in the world.

Keith Vaz: I thank my right hon. Friend very much for what she is saying, and she is absolutely right. Twelve months have elapsed since the promise that there would be a resolution before the UN. The Quint met last night in London, and the Foreign Secretary tweeted a photograph of himself with the participants, but there is no timetable. Does my right hon. Friend agree that these meetings are meaningless without a timetable for peace with all the parties at the table at the same time?

Emily Thornberry: My right hon. Friend is right: warm words butter no parsnips, as my grandmother used to say. Matthew Rycroft says now that

"the political track...is at a dead-end. There is no meaningful political process going on".

If we are wrong about that, we would be very grateful for some reassurance from the Minister, but we have been waiting and waiting, and children are dying, and we have to do something about it.

We are bound to ask, for example, what has happened to that draft resolution: why has it been killed off—indeed, has it been killed off? Is the situation as the Saudi ambassador to the UN said when first asked about the UK's draft resolution this time last year:

"There is a continuous and joint agreement with Britain concerning the draft resolution, and whether there is a need for it or not"?

We must ask this Minister: is that "continuous and joint agreement" with Saudi Arabia still in place? If so, why has it never been disclosed to the House?

The fear is that Saudi Arabia does not want a ceasefire and that it sees no value in negotiating a peace—not when Crown Prince Salman believes that the rebellion can still be crushed, whatever the humanitarian cost. If he does believe that, are we really to accept that the UK Government are going along with that judgment?

The Minister will, of course, point to the so-called peace forum chaired by the Foreign Secretary this week—the Quint—and say that that is evidence that the UK is doing its job to move the political process forward, but when the only participants in the peace forum are Saudi Arabia, two of its allies, and two of the countries supplying most of its arms, that is not a "peace forum." I respectfully suggest that far from being a peace forum, it is a council of war. What we really need—what we urgently need and have needed for more than a year and a month—is the moral and political force which comes from a UN Security Council resolution obliging all parties to cease hostilities, obliging all parties to allow

humanitarian relief, and obliging all parties to work towards a political solution.

I ask the Minister: how much longer do we have to wait? When will the Government finally bring forward the resolution? If the answer is that, because of opposition from the Saudis and the Americans, they will never present that resolution, do they not at least owe it to fellow members of the UN Security Council, and to Members of this House—and, indeed, to the children of Yemen—to admit that the role of penholder on Yemen is no longer a position they can in good conscience occupy and that they should pass on that role of drafting a resolution to another country which is less joined at the hip to Crown Prince Salman and President Donald Trump?

Let me close by quoting my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition in his last letter to the Prime Minister on the subject of Yemen:

"Whilst the immediate priority should be humanitarian assistance...it is time the Government takes immediate steps to play its part in ending the suffering of the Yemeni people, ends its support of the Saudi coalition's conduct in the war and take appropriate action"

through the UN

"to bring the conflict to a peaceful, negotiated resolution."

Those are the three tests of whether the Government are willing to take action today, and I hope that by the end of this emergency debate we will have some indication of whether they are going to take that action, or whether it is just going to be more of the same.

1.39 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for securing this opportunity to discuss what we all understand to be a significant humanitarian crisis in Yemen. I appreciate the fact that he visited Yemen earlier this year, and he clearly has a deep and passionate knowledge of the situation there. A number of questions have come up, but I would like to start with the issue that tends to be the most neglected—namely, the origins of the conflict. We seem to start these debates partway through. I will get to the questions that have been raised, but it is important to set out the background because it explains the complexity with which a number of Members have approached the issue. It is not as clear cut as some might suggest.

The causes of the conflict are numerous and complex. Since unification in 1990, Yemen has suffered internal power struggles, unrest and terrorist attacks. After a year of protests in 2011, the 33-year rule of President Saleh transferred to President Hadi as part of a unity Government brokered with regional support. A national dialogue process began, which offered an opportunity for a democratic future. Tragically, that opportunity was lost when the Houthi insurgency movement, which claimed to have been excluded from the national dialogue process, sought to take power through violence.

In September 2014, Houthi rebels took the capital by force, prompting President Hadi to flee to the southern city of Aden. The Houthis then began advancing on the south of the country. President Hadi, as the internationally recognised leader of the legitimate Government of Yemen, requested military help from the Saudi-led coalition. The conflict between the Government of Yemen, backed by the coalition, and the Houthis and their allies, backed

[Alistair Burt]

by former President Saleh, has so far lasted 1,000 days. Let us also remember the attacks carried out by al-Qaeda, Daesh and non-state groups against the Yemeni people, other countries in the region and international shipping lanes. Those groups use ungoverned space, which Yemen has been in the past and threatens to become again.

The impact of conflict and terrorism on the Yemeni people has been devastating. Let me read a letter that has been sent to the House today from the ambassador of the Republic of Yemen to the United Kingdom. He says:

“I represent the Government of Yemen, which came to power after the popular overthrow of former dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh. This government is elected, UN-mandated and constitutionally legitimate. It was driven from the capital Sana’a by force, by the Houthi militias in alliance with Ali Abdullah Saleh.

The Arab Coalition is in Yemen at our request, to restore constitutional government and reverse the Houthi coup. Actions that undermine that Coalition also undermine us.

In the last two weeks the Houthis added extra taxes and customs checkpoints that increased the prices in areas under their control by more than 100%. As an example the Yemeni government sells a gallon of petrol at the cost of 850 Yemeni Ryals in cities like Aden and Mareb which are under the government’s control while in Houthi controlled areas it costs 1700 Yemeni Ryals. The prices of wheat and flour face a similar increase.

The Houthis continue to place the city of Taiz, in central Yemen, under siege preventing any aid from going in. People living in Taiz are forced to smuggle in food, medicine and even water. Last week an entire family were executed in Taiz under the hands of Houthi armed men, we have an obligation as a government to protect our citizens.”

I start there because, all too often, that side of the discussion is just not raised at all. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield for making it clear that, contrary to a lot of media reports, there are two sides to this. It is important to understand what is going on there and what the coalition—which, as the ambassador says, is acting in support of a legitimate UN-mandated Government—is attempting to prevent and stop. That brings us to our role and to what is happening at present.

Graham P. Jones: The Minister is making a valid point. Is not the validity of it reinforced by the fact that this House should be upholding international law and a democratic Government, as well as trying to bring peace and alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Yemen?

Alistair Burt: Yes, the hon. Gentleman is right. The role of the United Kingdom is to do what it can in the circumstances, first, to address the urgent humanitarian situation and also to address an international governance point that is often missed. The legitimate Government, fighting against an insurgency, have been joined by others, and that is the basis of the conflict.

The part of the debate that I have found most difficult up to now is what has been said by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield and the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) about the United Kingdom’s role and what we have been trying to do. I am well aware, from the time I have been back in the office in the summer and from what was done before, of the significant efforts made by the United Kingdom at the UN, and principally

through the negotiation process with the parties most involved, to try to bring things to a conclusion and to do all we can in relation to the humanitarian situation.

Let me now address the UK’s role, which will lead me to talk about some of the allegations made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield and to make clear what it is we do and do not do. I shall then address the humanitarian situation, if I may. President Hadi asked the international community for support “to protect Yemen, and deter Houthi aggression”.

The Saudi-led coalition responded to that call. The United Kingdom is not a party to that conflict, nor a member of the military coalition. The UK is not involved in carrying out strikes, or in directing or conducting operations in Yemen. Let me fill that out a bit more.

Royal Air Force and Royal Navy liaison officers monitor Saudi-led coalition operations in Yemen and provide information to the UK Ministry of Defence. The liaison officers are not embedded personnel taking part in Saudi-led operations, they are not involved in carrying out strikes and they do not direct or conduct operations in Yemen. They are not involved in the Saudi-led coalition targeting decision-making process. They remain under UK command and control. Sensitive information provided by the liaison officers is used by the Permanent Joint Headquarters and MOD officials when providing advice on Saudi-led coalition capability and when conducting analysis of incidents of potential concern which result from the Saudi-led coalition air operations in Yemen. The operations directorate maintains a database, referred to as the tracker, which records incidents and subsequent analysis. We have been tracking 318 incidents of potential concern since 2015, and this is used to inform the MOD’s advice to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Bob Stewart: I have visited the command and control centre in Riyadh. It is true that Royal Air Force personnel are present, but they are not involved in the targeting. When I spoke to them, part of their role seemed to be to help the Saudis and their allies to ensure that the rules of engagement resulted in minimum casualties. Their intention was to try to get the rules of engagement to be as good as our own, and they seemed to be doing that quite successfully while I was there.

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his personal observations.

The question of arms control has been raised. We have a rigorous legal and parliamentary process, and ensuring that international humanitarian law is not breached is clearly a vital part of that. The information supplied by those liaison officers is crucial to ensuring that our international obligations are observed. That is why they are there.

Mr Mitchell: This debate is, above all, about the humanitarian consequences, and the UN Secretary-General has said that Saudi Arabia is, through the blockade, in breach not only of resolution 2216 but of international humanitarian law. I say to my right hon. Friend, who is a long-standing personal friend of more than 30 years, that I think he may be in danger of having misled the House earlier in his response to me about the role of British servicemen. Would he like to correct the record and use this opportunity to make this very clear? Otherwise, what he said may be open to misinterpretation.

Alistair Burt: I do not quite know what bit of what I have said my right hon. Friend is referring to. I have read out the details in relation to the work of our liaison officers on international humanitarian law, and I cannot say anything different. If I have said anything that he thinks is wrong, he can correct me either now or at the end of the debate when he has an opportunity to say something else. I have put on record what our situation is. If he thinks that that is misleading, I am here to be corrected, but I am reading out what I believe is the Government's position very clearly.

Emily Thornberry: I wonder whether the Minister could clarify something that has always genuinely confused me about the role of the military in Saudi Arabia. Is there just one targeting centre, or is it correct that there is another in the south? Are military personnel involved in the south of the country? Indeed, are people from British companies, BAE Systems in particular, involved in the south of the country? If they are supposed to be there to ensure that international humanitarian law is not breached, what are they doing? Are they ensuring that targeting is better or that things are not targeted? If they are ensuring that targeting is better, how is it that so many civilian targets seem to get hit?

Alistair Burt: The answer to the last part of the right hon. Lady's question comes from the investigations into incidents where there is legitimate concern that there may have been civilian casualties. That process was started by the coalition; it was not in place at the beginning. We have provided advice not only so that information can be given to us, but to assist in the process of ensuring that the coalition targets legitimate military targets. I understand that thousands of places have been deemed not to be targets. As in any conflict—this is one of the reasons why my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield was safe—there are indications of where attacks should not happen, and I believe that we have been part of the process of ensuring that the coalition understands the international rules of engagement.

I cannot directly answer the question about BAE Systems personnel being elsewhere as I just do not know the answer, but I have noted what the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury said, and I will come back to that.

Hilary Benn *rose*—

Alistair Burt: I want to move on to discuss the humanitarian situation, but I am of course happy to give way to right hon. Gentleman.

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the Minister. Since the House understands the Government's position to be that they do not feel there have been breaches of international humanitarian law, because they would otherwise have had to invoke the arms control criteria, and given that the UN panel of experts that I quoted earlier was of the view that breaches of international humanitarian law had taken place, will the Minister tell the House what other sources of information the Government have drawn upon in reaching their conclusion? Do they include the views of the military officers who are offering the advice that he has just described to the House?

Alistair Burt: The observations of those whose role it is to see what is happening in order to report on potential breaches of international humanitarian law are clearly a vital part of that process. There is other, more sensitive information that I will not go into, but there is a clearly a process that has been designed to try to give reassurance to all of us. This is a difficult situation, and we have continued to support an ally that is under attack from external sources and engaged in an effort to restore a legitimate Government. In supporting that effort, we have done what is right to ensure that international humanitarian law is observed. We have used all the information made available to us, so that we are sure of the circumstances. Should that be challenged—it is possible to challenge it through both the House and the courts—the circumstances would change.

Emily Thornberry: Will the Minister give way?

Alistair Burt: I will, but I do want to move on to the humanitarian situation.

Emily Thornberry: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for indulging me one more time. I understand that some of the information may be sensitive, but are the British Government in a position to share the information that makes them so confident that there have been no breaches of international humanitarian law? The UN panel of experts seems to have come to a different conclusion.

Alistair Burt: The initial responsibility to investigate any incidents lies with the state involved, and Saudi Arabia has been doing that with its investigations. I genuinely do not know the process of transferring that information to the UN should the UN request to see it, but I will have an answer for the right hon. Lady.

I know that there has been an instruction to be mindful of the time, Mr Deputy Speaker, so I will be as tight on time as I can, but I want to talk about both the blockade and the humanitarian response before moving on to the negotiations. As for the restrictions brought in after the missile attack of 4 November, I will deal first with where the missile came from. The right hon. Lady asked me whether we disagree with the UN's assessment, and yes we do. That draft assessment was written some time ago, and there is the possibility that a different assessment by the UN has not been made public. The United Kingdom is quite confident that there is sufficient evidence to indicate that the missile came from an external source. If it did not, the right hon. Lady and others can answer the question of where such a missile came from in Yemen, but it is quite clear to us that it came from an external source. We therefore disagree with the UN's initial draft report, and the evidence will come through in due course when a further report is published. That is all I can say.

The coalition's response to a direct attack on Riyadh airport was sharp and severe. It wanted to be able to protect itself and, in doing so, placed restrictions on the ports in order to control what was coming in. Now, we do not disagree with what was said either by the right hon. Lady or my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield, and the UK's clear position is that it is imperative that those restrictions are relieved. I am not going to dance on the head of a pin here; if Members

[Alistair Burt]

want to call it a blockade, it is a blockade. There is no point in dancing around that. However, humanitarian and commercial supplies must be allowed in in order to feed the people.

As my right hon. Friend said, and as the House knows well, the vast bulk of food, water and fuel that comes into Yemen to keep the people alive is not humanitarian aid; it is ordinary commercial stuff. We have been clear right from the beginning of the restrictions that the UK's view is that they should be lifted, and we have maintained that, so to be told that we have not done enough is just wrong. As evidence of some degree of success, there was some easing of the restrictions last week, but not enough. I have an update that I am happy to share with the House. It states:

“Humanitarian and commercial vessels are beginning to enter Hodeidah and Saleef ports. Since Sunday, three vessels have arrived and are being unloaded. This includes 2 commercial vessels into Hodeidah carrying respectively 5,500 metric tonnes and 29,520 metric tonnes of wheat flour. One humanitarian vessel has arrived into Saleef with supplies to support 1.8 million people for a month (and 25,000 metric tonnes of food). In addition, approximately 23 vessels have been cleared by UN Verification Inspection Mechanism (UNVIM) although not yet permitted to unload.”

It is essential that they are permitted to unload, and we are making representations to that effect. However, the fact that there has been some movement in response to representations made by, among others, the highest levels of the British Government indicates that the urgency of relieving the humanitarian situation is being heard. At the same time, we recognise the security needs of those who are threatened by missiles targeted at their commercial airports and civilian areas.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the fact that the Minister has described the situation as a blockade. If the blockade is not lifted completely, what is his estimate of how close Yemen is to famine—days or weeks?

Alistair Burt: Reports differ depending on the area. Five cities have already run out of fuel, meaning that power supplies, sanitation and other things cannot be maintained. On average, food supplies appear to be better and may be measured in months, but that will not apply to every individual area because some will be worse than others. A Minister will not stand here and say that because things can be measured by a few more days, the situation is less urgent; it is not. It is absolutely top of our priorities. In a variety of different ways, the UK has sought to make clear the importance of responding not only to the security needs of the coalition, but to the humanitarian situation.

I want to put the following on the record. On 5 November, there was a Foreign and Commonwealth Office statement condemning the attempted missile attack. On 13 November, my right hon. Friend the new Secretary of State for International Development spoke to Mark Lowcock of the UN about the humanitarian situation. On 15 November, an FCO statement stressed the need for immediate humanitarian and commercial access. On 16 November, I spoke to the UAE's Minister of State. On 18 November, the Foreign Secretary made a call to the UN Secretary-General. On 20 November, I spoke to the House. On 21 November, I spoke to the Saudi

Arabian Foreign Minister. On 23 November, the Foreign Secretary spoke to Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. On 29 November, as we speak, the Prime Minister is visiting Riyadh, where she said:

“I am also clear that the flow of commercial supplies, on which the country depends, must be resumed if we are to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe. During my discussions with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh last night, we agreed that steps needed to be taken as a matter of urgency to address this, and that we would take forward more detailed discussions on how this could be achieved.”

The Foreign Secretary hosted talks in London this week, after which we will intensify efforts with all parties to reach a settlement that will sustain security for Saudi Arabia, the coalition and Yemen.

For the House to feel in any way that there is not a serious response to the catastrophic situation that my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield set out with passion and determination is not correct. We are doing everything we can, at the highest level, to deal with the humanitarian crisis and the security situation.

Mr Mitchell: I am grateful for the Prime Minister's powerful words in Riyadh last night, which my right hon. Friend has just read out. Those words will be welcomed on both sides of the House. This is the nub of the argument he is trying to address: I am sure the House feels that the extent of the crisis and the Government's response are not equal. I have no prescription for the political answer to the humanitarian crisis we have described today, but the breaches of international humanitarian law are so egregious that they call for a tougher and firmer response from Her Majesty's Government.

Alistair Burt: We are getting to the nub of it now. We are all agreed on this, and we know how serious it is. I have set out what we have been trying to do. If there was another lever to pull that would deal with the situation—my right hon. Friend has just said that he does not know the political answer—we would pull it, but that is not the case. The best lever to pull is in the negotiations process that we have discussed. We do not think this can be done through the UN. It is much better to deal with the parties, on both sides, who have the opportunity and the responsibility to get something done around the table.

The other day, the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) rightly mentioned the Quint talks, in which a number of states are involved. It is unfair, on reflection, to call it a war council. The Omanis, for example, would be deeply upset with that reference. The talks involve those who have the capacity not only to make decisions on one side—the coalition side—but to make sure that the other side, the side of the Houthis and their Yemeni allies who have been estranged from the UN process by their own decisions for many months, re-engages in the negotiations. We need to have parties there who can do it, including the UN. That is the purpose of the talks, which the United Kingdom has led.

As colleagues have recognised, the only way to end both the humanitarian suffering in the longer term and the conflict is for the parties to agree on it. It is not a military solution; it is a political solution. That is what the United Kingdom has been doing for some months and will continue to do until we get the answer.

Keith Vaz: I thank the Minister for updating the House so regularly and for engaging with the all-party parliamentary group on Yemen and its officers, the hon. Members for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and for Charnwood (Edward Argar) and me, on these issues.

The meeting of the Quint was yesterday. What is the timetable to mandate the Omanis to bring the Houthis to the negotiating table so that we can conclude this matter? That is the issue, is it not?

Alistair Burt: Again, if we could have a timetable we would have one, but we cannot because we are dealing with people who are not yet parties to this process. They have been and need to be brought back into the process. The only words that can adequately describe it, as the House would wish, are, “As soon as possible.” The Houthis should be re-engaged with the UN in a process to start the de-escalation that will lead to the end of the conflict. That is what we have been seeking, and that is what we are continuing to do.

I will conclude, because the House has been generous in giving me a great deal of time. I have not, although I could have, said a lot about the direct humanitarian aid that is being delivered by the United Kingdom—that aid is significant and important. We have been working consistently, and £155 million has gone in to support the people of Yemen, and it has been used through indirect agencies, the UN and various non-governmental organisations. I entirely concur with what my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield said about the bravery of those who are engaged, and it would help if the Yemeni Government would pay public health workers in particular. Some of the work that is needed to prevent the return of cholera could then be done, and it would assist food distribution. The aid agencies have worked extremely hard in the circumstances, but the only thing that would allow their work to be effective is an end to the conflict, which we are working so hard to achieve through the negotiations.

Although it has taken some time, and although it is clear how strongly Members present and people outside the House feel about the issue, to believe that there is more the United Kingdom could do is, to a degree, unfair, but it does not matter. We are the Government, and we must do all we can on delivering humanitarian aid, on engaging with the parties who can do something about it and on ensuring that we are on the right side of the law.

Should there be anything in the record that needs correcting, I assure my right hon. Friend that I will correct it. I am confident about what I read out earlier but, if there is anything I need to correct, I will do so. We seek to do what we can in this dreadful situation. The most important thing is that there is a continued release of the restrictions on the ports, which is what we are working towards at the highest level, as Members can tell from the Prime Minister’s speech. If we do not achieve our aims, I know the House will bring us back again.

2.7 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for securing the debate. I agree with much of what he said—his expertise on the matter is valuable. I also agree with much that the shadow Foreign Secretary said. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Leicester East

(Keith Vaz), who is steadfast in his work with the all-party parliamentary group on Yemen, and to the aid agencies that are working in circumstances that are incredibly difficult both for their staff and for the people they are working with in Yemen.

The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield mentioned the difficulties in reporting from Yemen, and I rely heavily on some of the first-hand testimony coming through from Twitter, which seems a reasonable way of getting information out of the country. I mentioned the case of Hisham al-Omeisy in a letter to the Government. He was taken by the Houthis on 12 August 2017 and has yet to be seen again. I ask the Government to do all they can to try to secure the safety of journalists in Yemen.

Today I am missing the opening of the new Silverdale nursery in Dalmarnock. The nursery has 140 places for children under five and, while thinking about Yemen, it struck me that if 140 children in Dalmarnock were to die today, we would do something about it. If they were to die tomorrow, we would do something about it. Some 130 under-fives are dying every day in Yemen. If that were happening in this country, we would do something about it urgently and seriously. We would not have our own children dying from the very preventable cause of extreme malnutrition and disease, which take hold so easily when children do not have the food and resilience they need.

One child is dying every 10 minutes in Yemen. It is shocking even to think of the number who have died since the start of this debate. We cannot accept that any longer; it has been going on for far, far too long, and we have a global responsibility to children, wherever they are, to make sure that they are safe, that they are fed and that they will live a happy and healthy life. Anything we can do to that end we must do urgently.

For the children who survive, the impact will be lasting. Millions of children are, and have been, out of school. They do not have a nursery to go to. They are living with stunting, a lifelong condition that will affect their growth and development, including their cognitive development, throughout the rest of their lives. In 2012, UNICEF was already warning of stunting, saying that 58% of children under five were stunted, and that was before this latest conflict. That is a generation being left with a life-limiting condition that we could do more to prevent.

The International Committee of the Red Cross reported yesterday that it had purchased 750,000 litres of fuel to ensure that the water pumps in Hodeidah and Taiz can operate. Those pumps will last only a month on that fuel. The ICRC also reports that nine other cities do not have sufficient fuel to run their water supplies, which is a critical situation given that Yemen has already experienced one of the largest cholera epidemics in history, which has already left about 2,000 people dead. Although the outbreak seems to be on the wane, without water and access to appropriate sanitation it will almost certainly come back. As the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield mentioned, diphtheria, a very preventable disease that we do not even see here, is also taking hold. So I ask the Minister—I know he will do his best on this—to tell us what the Government are doing to ensure that fuel gets into the country, because without it the petrol pumps will run dry, which will have a knock-on effect on food prices.

[Alison Thewliss]

Aid very much needs to get in, and aid agencies say so, but all agencies are also stressing the absolute necessity of getting commercial goods in. The scarcity and fuel prices mean that prices are high, and even where there is food people cannot afford to feed themselves. They do not know where their next meal is coming from. It must be incredibly heartbreaking for people to be able to see food on a shelf but not be able to afford to buy it to feed their family. We must bear in mind that many employees in Yemen have not been paid for some time—over a year in some cases at least. Médecins sans Frontières reported in October that 1.2 million Yemeni civil servants have received little to no salary for more than a year. MSF pays the salaries of 1,200 public health staff that it is using in its clinics, but clearly that is not enough by any manner of means. If the doctors trying to treat the people who are starving have no money to feed themselves either, the situation is a disaster. I urge Ministers to consider what else they can do to get more money in to allow staff to be paid, to get the economy restarted and to make sure people have something to live on.

I also urge, as I have urged following previous statements, that we need to see aid getting into the country in the first place, so the blockade must be removed as soon as possible. But that aid also needs to be able to travel around Yemen, and the border posts, the visas and the difficulties the aid agencies are facing in getting around the country are preventing that flow of aid. It is also clear that the different factions in the conflict are using the system as a means of diverting aid to their own people, so that aid that might be intended to go to one place of desperate need is being diverted. That is not to say that people there might not need it, because I am sure they do, but it is being diverted from the people who need to get it. We need to make sure that it can get through to those who need it and that it is appropriately used when it gets there. I urge Ministers to do anything they can to make sure that aid convoys going through the country can actually get to where they need to be.

Finally, I wish to touch on the issue of arms sales, because they are a crucial part of the influence and leverage our country has in this conflict. Sadly, the communiqué that came out of the Quint meeting concentrated far, far more on weapons and the security situation, which I know and appreciate is difficult, than on the humanitarian situation and the need to get goods in through the ports. I am sure the 25 aid agencies that contacted the Foreign Secretary in their open letter will feel very let down by that, and I echo the shadow Foreign Secretary's comments about how the attendance list of that meeting could have been broader. Efforts need to be made to get more people from Yemen—from civil society and from organisations working there on the ground—involved in such things. In addition, if we look at the picture from the meeting, we note that there may be one woman at the back of the photograph, but women are not being included in this process. We need women as part of the process to help make the peace and make it sustainable.

Alistair Burt: When the national dialogue process was going on—I was out in Yemen for that—we spoke to women and young people who had not been part of the governance process. The national dialogue was giving them an opportunity, but the Houthi involvement and

the conflict killed that opportunity. Otherwise, there would have been more women involved—that, I think, is what some of the people are fighting for.

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely appreciate that, and the testimony I heard from some of the aid agencies and women's organisations that came to visit, meeting the right hon. Member for Leicester East and I some time ago, reflected that. They want to be part of the process. Those organisations do exist, and the Government must keep reaching out to them and keep involving them in that process. If we are to get a lasting peace, it must be a lasting peace for all the people of Yemen; it must be as wide as possible, and the attendance must include those organisations.

We lose a huge amount of credibility in this whole discussion, and we cannot be a broker for peace, while we are involved in arming a side in the conflict. We are complicit in what happens. The Minister mentioned 318 incidents of concern, and he may wish to clarify that. How many more incidents are acceptable to the Government, given that 318 incidents of concern have been picked up by the people involved and the armed forces on the ground in Yemen? That is a huge amount of "concern" to have. The amount of aid that has gone in is welcome, and it is good. The Minister will correct me if I am wrong, but I believe we have put in £202 million in aid since 2015, which is dwarfed by the £4.6 billion in arms sales. A huge amount of money is going into producing absolute brutality and desperation on the ground. If we want the country to be a success, we should be putting all the money and all the effort into rebuilding it, not into destroying what little is still there.

Graham P. Jones: The hon. Lady talks about arms sales, and I accept that we should care about people, but we need to look at the current situation. Is she aware that some 80 rockets have been fired into Saudi Arabia? What is preventing those rockets from killing people is the US Patriot defence missile system. That is defence equipment sold by the US to Saudi Arabia to prevent 80 rockets from landing on ordinary people and killing them. Does she agree with those defence sales?

Alison Thewliss: What I agree with is that we are putting more arms into the situation, which is continuing to escalate it, not—

Graham P. Jones *rose*—

Alison Thewliss: The hon. Gentleman will have his time later on, as I am sure he will wish to contribute. Adding more weapons to the situation is not going to help.

You will be aware, Mr Deputy Speaker, that my daughter has been sent home from nursery sick today. She will be picked up from her nursery by my husband, and she will get medicine, treatment and access to a doctor if she needs it. Unlike parents in Yemen, I will not have to choose which child to save and which child to let die. That is a situation parents in Yemen are facing every single day. Every 10 minutes a child there will die, and parents will have that for the rest of their lives; they will have seen children die before them. We must be committed to finding peace. We must secure, first and foremost, a ceasefire, in order to let aid in. We have had plenty of words, commitments and talk, but Yemen cannot wait. We need action now.

2.18 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): If you will forgive me, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will talk about this country for which I hold a deep affection, having studied Arabic there just over 20 years ago. It is a country of great richness and great culture. In many ways, it is absolutely the heart of Arabia. It is there that the camel was domesticated, which allowed the colonisation of the rest of Arabia. So it is, for most Arabs, very much seen as the heart of the culture; indeed, Yemeni Arabic is seen as the purest—the closest to Koranic Arabic that is currently spoken. So to see the country so ruined, so destroyed is a matter of great sadness for all of us who love Arabian culture, the Arabic language and the Arab people.

We have to be clear about what is causing that destruction. It is absolutely right to say that the blockade on Yemen is wrong—there is no doubt in my mind that Saudi Arabia has a particular responsibility to address the humanitarian concerns facing the Yemeni people today—but it would be wrong to point solely at Riyadh. The decisions being made in Tehran today are having an effect that is being felt throughout the region. It would be wrong to be silent in the face of such aggression, and it would be wrong to ignore the roots of it.

When we look at Zaidi Islam, which as we all know descends from the fifth branch of Shi'a Islam—from the son of the son-in-law of the Prophet, Ali Husayn—it is worth remembering that Iranian involvement in Yemen is nothing new. Indeed, it is said that the Prophet himself was born in the year of the elephant, which is so named because it is the year in which the Shahanshah, the King of Persia, landed elephants in Yemen in order to invade what was then called “Arabia Felix”—happy Arabia.

Since then, Iranian involvement in the region has been frequent, and it is so again today, when the Iranians are landing not war elephants but missiles, small arms and rifles. They are equally poisonous to the politics of that region of Arabia today as they have been for nearly two millennia. Just because it is true that Saudi Arabia's treatment of the Yemeni people today is not acceptable, that does not mean that we should ignore the crimes being committed by Iran.

I urge the Minister, who has done so much for the region—he has done so much not only for the countries and our relationships with them, but for the people themselves—and who understands so well the countries that make up this beautiful and important part of the world, to remember the history that is playing out. I urge him to remember that we have real friends in the region. We have real friends in Yemen whom, of course, we must help. We have real friends in Saudi Arabia, whom we must help to defend themselves. We have real friends in Oman and in the Emirates who are also fighting against Iranian aggression. As we stand up for our friends, we must urge them to remember that they, too, have a responsibility.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to my friend, the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, for giving way. He referred to the role Iran is playing in Yemen, but are not the Iranians also trying to influence and destabilise other countries on the Arabian peninsula and even trying to increase their influence in Oman?

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman, who certainly is a friend, is of course absolutely right. The actions of the Iranian Government over the past few years of the Khomeini-ite dictatorship have been taken to destabilise many areas of the middle east. If one looks at Oman today, one can see the actions of Iranian-backed insurgencies. If one looks at Bahrain today, one can see violent insurgencies, rather than just the political groups that one sees in Oman. Look at the eastern seaboard of Saudi Arabia. I am not going to praise the Saudis for their treatment of the Shi'as in eastern Saudi Arabia, around Dhahran, because frankly it is not great, but bearing in mind the way the Iranian Government are seeking to radicalise Shi'a groups in eastern Saudi Arabia, it is right of the Government in Riyadh to see threats coming from the east. They are right, because that is what is happening.

All that does not excuse the human rights abuses of the blockade. It does not excuse the famine and punishment that is being made collective against the whole people of Yemen, and I will not excuse it, but we must remember that this is a war being fought against an aggressive regime that has several times now fired missiles at Riyadh and at civilian populations in Saudi Arabia. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) is absolutely right that the death of the children in Yemen is a crime that cries out for justice, but we must also remember that if Iranian weapons were being landed in Glasgow, we would take action. If Iranian weapons were being fired from France into London, we would take action. I understand that the Saudis are right to take action about it.

Of course, we would not practice collective punishment, we would not blockade and we would not abuse human rights to defend ourselves. We must understand that although there is a legitimacy of Saudi action, as friends of Saudi Arabia and supporters of the welcome changes that are happening in that country today, we have a role and a right to speak out. I welcome the words of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to Mohammad Bin Salman only a few hours ago. She is absolutely right, and she speaks for the United Kingdom with passion and honour when she calls on him to act, and to act now.

2.25 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) not only on securing this debate but on his powerful speech. I associate myself with his remarks. I shall resist the temptation to address some of the broader political questions that have come up during the debate so far and focus on the sheer scale of the humanitarian crisis, and particularly the impact of the blockade. I join the right hon. Gentleman and other speakers, including the Minister, in paying tribute to all those who are working on the ground to try to make a difference in this terrible situation, including the United Nations, aid agencies, the Department for International Development and, above all of course, the long-suffering people of Yemen.

The scale of the crisis is enormous. As we have heard, Yemen could be just weeks away from a once-in-a-generation famine. The UN estimates that 85% of Yemen's population is in immediate need of humanitarian assistance. That has increased over just the past 12 months by

[Stephen Twigg]

2 million people. Some 10 million people are at immediate risk of death, and our own Department for International Development says that they

“may not survive if they do not receive humanitarian assistance” in some form or another.

It is difficult to get fully accurate figures from sources on the ground, or elsewhere, of the precise human cost of this tragic conflict. It would be very useful if the Minister was able to give us an estimate of how many civilian lives have already been lost since the conflict in Yemen began. As the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield reminded us, Yemen has long been reliant on imports for its food. Even before the war, nearly 90% of Yemen’s food was imported. Yemen requires monthly food imports of 350,000 metric tonnes, of which 80% comes through the two ports of Hodeidah and Saleef. While the ports were fully blockaded, no goods were coming in at all, leaving a dangerous and deadly backlog.

Since the full blockade began three weeks ago, the situation has got even worse. Cholera is widespread, with a suspected 1 million cases and at least 2,000 deaths. As well as having one of the largest recorded cholera outbreaks since records began, Yemen is facing the threat of diphtheria, an extremely contagious and deadly disease the symptoms of which include high temperatures, difficulty breathing and a sore throat. Around one in 10 adults who contract diphtheria will die; for children, the proportion is closer to one in five.

In this country, we have almost eradicated diphtheria. Since 2010, the UK has recorded 20 cases, with one tragic recorded fatality. That is in the past seven years; in the past two months, Yemen has reported 120 cases, with 14 fatalities, and the numbers are rising. Given how contagious the disease is, it is surely only a matter of time, unless something changes dramatically, before hundreds, if not thousands, of Yemeni people contract diphtheria, with devastating consequences for that country.

The life-saving medication and humanitarian aid that is used to treat these diseases has been withheld from innocent civilians as a direct consequence of the Saudi blockade. Even with the modest easing over the past week, about which we heard from the Minister, lives remain at risk. As has been said, before the blockade, 17 million Yemenis—more than 60% of the population—were food insecure, with an estimated 7 million at immediate risk of famine. That represents a 20% increase over the last year. Half a million children were suffering from severe, acute malnutrition. Last week, the Famine Early Warning Systems Network released an alert saying that

“famine is likely in Yemen if key ports remain closed.”

That is why this issue of the blockade is so important. The report went on to say that

“if the ports remain closed or if the ports are unable to handle large quantities of food, famine is likely with thousands of deaths each day due to lack of food and the outbreak of disease.”

Four governorates in Yemen have malnutrition rates above the emergency threshold and seven others exceed the threshold of “serious”.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is passionately outlining the current humanitarian crisis and the need to remove the Saudi blockade. I absolutely agree. Does he not also

agree that the problem with Yemen is that it was already the poorest country in the middle east and that it attracted far too little attention from the international community? The UK had always been generous through the Department for International Development, but it was, none the less, one of the poorest countries, and this conflict and this crisis have come on top of already shocking statistics.

Stephen Twigg: My hon. Friend has been a consistent and powerful advocate on behalf of the Yemeni people, including the diaspora living in his own constituency. I absolutely agree with him and take the opportunity of his intervention to pay tribute to DFID, both for its longer-term involvement in Yemen, which pre-dates the conflict, and for the work that it has sought to do during the current crisis.

As of Monday, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported that 29 vessels carrying food and fuel had been denied entry. As the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield said, over the weekend, the Saudi coalition did allow a single ship into the port of Hodeidah. That ship was carrying 6,000 tonnes of flour, which roughly equates to 10 million loaves of bread for the nearly 21 million people on the brink of starvation. Clearly, it is not enough, and the people who are being punished are the innocent civilians of Yemen.

A number of ships are now in the holding area off the Red sea ports, carrying crucial supplies, including ships with nearly 170,000 metric tonnes of desperately needed food. Last night, a vessel carrying 30,000 metric tonnes of wheat was able to berth. However, four vessels carrying fuel and three carrying food are still waiting for permission to dock. I urge the Government to use their good offices to ensure that those vessels carrying desperately needed supplies are able to berth in Hodeidah as soon as possible.

As others have said during the debate, fuel remains at the centre of the ongoing crisis in Yemen. Only two of the ships currently off Yemen are carrying petrol. Farmers in Yemen are reporting that they simply do not have enough fuel to run the agricultural equipment, which further compounds the risk of famine. What little fuel is left in Yemen is being sold at extortionate prices. Humanitarian organisations carried out an assessment, which suggested that a minimum of 1 million litres of fuel are needed for non-governmental organisations to operate at their pre-blockade level.

The two ships with fuel have enough petrol to last just 16 days. Estimates from Sana’a suggest that, unless something changes, petrol will run out in six days and diesel in 17 days. If that happens, the people will suffer even more, with hospitals and waste treatment facilities not being able to function properly. Without fuel, many of the humanitarian supplies waiting off Yemen will not have the opportunity, even if they can dock, to be moved around the country.

It is estimated that, within days, 8 million people will be without running water as the fuel required to pump the water runs out. Safe water and sanitation are vital to combating the outbreaks of cholera and diphtheria. Yemen’s three largest cities have had to shut down their water and sewage treatment facilities and a further five cities will do so within days. In Hodeidah, untreated water and sewage has been washing up into the streets for several days now.

As the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) said in her excellent speech, the International Committee of the Red Cross took the very unusual step this week of buying fuel stocks to help to restart the water and sewage treatment facilities in Yemen's second and third largest cities—Hodeidah and Taiz. However, given the extortionate price of fuel, they were able to buy only enough supplies to last a month. May I praise the ICRC for doing that? It acknowledges that it was an unusual but necessary step to help the people of Yemen. I now implore the Government to do all they can to work with NGOs and others on the ground to ensure that much-needed fuel gets into and around Yemen as soon as possible.

As we have heard, health facilities have been destroyed during the conflict: one in six has been completely destroyed and barely half are functional at all. Many have had to close because of the lack of access to clean water. Only 30% of the required medical supplies are getting into Yemen. As a result, many diseases go untreated, compounding an already horrific situation. Although vaccines are slowly making their way back into Yemen through aid flights, much, much more needs to be done to ensure that the entire population is protected against diseases that are both preventable and curable.

On Saturday, I will be taking part in a vigil for Yemen in Liverpool. I am delighted that my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), is here, and I know that he will be joining that vigil with members of the Yemeni diaspora in Liverpool. It is so important that we send a clear message that this conflict is not forgotten. When I speak to the Yemeni diaspora in Liverpool, it is clear that the one thing that they want is peace in Yemen. They recognise that that will be achieved through diplomatic means.

I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister is in the region. It is vital that she presses loudly and clearly for the full lifting of this blockade. This debate today is timely and important. The message is clear that the blockade must be lifted immediately, but we recognise that even the lifting of the blockade, vital as that is, is far from sufficient. We need to keep coming back in this House to the issue of Yemen until we see a ceasefire, a political solution and an end to the bloodshed.

2.36 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is an honour to follow the Chairman of the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who has spoken powerfully on this matter not only today, but on several previous occasions. His commitment is wholehearted, as is that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), whom I congratulate on securing this debate today and who I know takes a huge personal interest in the matter. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Minister, because I know just how hard he works on this issue, and how close it is to his heart. He brings to his work a passion, which, if not unique, is certainly hugely important in Government.

I wish to use the words of other people in my speech, as I do not know a huge amount about the area. International development is something of great concern to me, as is foreign affairs. I thought that I would write to somebody I know who has much more experience of the situation in Yemen and who has been working with

the World Food Programme. He has sent me a couple of emails this week, and I will quote from them and from a couple of other things that he has sent me. He writes:

“From a food perspective, the situation is ‘beyond bleak’. It is a catastrophe beyond anything that I have ever seen before. We are talking of 17 million food insecure people. The World Food Programme is giving food and vouchers to around 6.5 million people across most of the country. Obviously this has been hampered over the last three weeks due to the blockade. Thankfully, that horror is now over and ships are docking. Remember that even pre-crisis Yemen was almost entirely dependent on food imports.”

He goes on:

“The blockade only served to make food a weapon of war. The World Food Programme expects that 3 million of the 17 million will be pushed into a deeper level of food insecurity as a result of the blockade. Market availability is acceptable but remains inaccessible due to inflation”—

hence the high prices.

He goes on:

“Cholera I believe is stabilising but still at around 800,000 people. It is the largest outbreak in modern history and utterly shameful.”

I will not go into the statistics, because the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby has done so already.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Like the hon. Gentleman, I have had letters from constituents voicing grave concerns about the situation in Yemen, particularly the blockade, food shortages and lack of medical supplies, so I agree wholeheartedly that something has to be done.

Jeremy Lefroy: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There is a huge lack of critical medical supplies, including vaccines and treatments to control the spread of cholera, and now of course that deadly disease, diphtheria.

I come to the second of my quotations from an eyewitness—Mark Lowcock, the emergency relief co-ordinator, whom the Chairman of the International Development Committee, I and several other colleagues met a couple of weeks ago. After a visit earlier this month, he said:

“Everywhere I went, I saw roads, bridges, factories, hotels, and houses that had been destroyed by bombing or shelling... I visited hospitals... Both had barely any electricity or water... I met seven-year-old Nora. She weighs 11 kg – the average weight for a two-year-old, not a seven-year-old. Dr. Khaled, the manager of Al Thawra hospital, where she is being treated, said staff there regularly turn away gravely ill malnourished children because they cannot accommodate them.”

There is, of course, a solution. I believe that a political solution is the only way forward: a lifting of the blockade, a cessation of hostilities. Without that, we will indeed face the worst humanitarian disaster in decades. The numbers sometimes seem almost too vast. There are other consequences as well.

I will quote again, finally, from the OCHA report, about a widow and mother of six—five daughters and a son—who

“had to abandon her home in...At Taiziah district in Taizz governorate, fleeing airstrikes and fighting in the area. The family left their village with only the clothes they were wearing, and settled in a nearby, somewhat more peaceful village. Uloom rented a small shop, but the business is struggling and cannot sustain the family's basic needs such as food, water and medicines. To ease the burden, Uloom decided to marry off her three young daughters.

[Jeremy Lefroy]

‘I didn’t have money and couldn’t feed all of the children’, she said. ‘I didn’t want to marry off my daughters so young, but I couldn’t stand them crying and starving. I regret what I did very much’.

That is one of the desperate individual human consequences of what we are seeing now.

Yesterday, I had the honour of chairing in Speaker’s House a meeting at which we discussed the tremendous progress made on countering malaria over the last 17 years. Millions of lives, including children’s lives, have been saved. Here we have an entirely preventable disaster looming. Tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of lives, perhaps even more, mainly of children and women, are at risk. We have the opportunity to act globally. I ask that the coalition, the Government of Saudi Arabia and their allies lift the blockade immediately to ensure that those lives can be saved. I thank the Prime Minister for what she said yesterday and today, and I urge the Government to continue in their efforts, day in, day out, until the crisis is resolved.

2.43 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy). He did himself a huge injustice in saying that he did not know much about the subject; he knows a great deal, and his passion was evident in what he said. I thank him for his remarks. I also commend the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), not only for calling this debate but for his incredible work as International Development Secretary. I think that he will go down as one of the best we have ever had. While he occupied that post, he did so much for Yemen and gave it so much of his time, for which we were very grateful. He gave a brilliant speech today.

It is important that we discuss Yemen on the Floor of the House. We do not get the opportunity to do so often enough. As chair of the all-party group on Yemen, and as one of two Members born in Aden, I believe that this has become a forgotten war, as the Foreign Secretary said. Allowing us to discuss this in prime parliamentary time means that it is forgotten no more.

I thank the hon. Members for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and for Charnwood (Edward Argar) for being such excellent officers of the all-party group. Yemen has very many friends in the House. This is a Thursday afternoon, but the House is packed. I also thank the young and swashbuckling Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, who learned about Yemen when he went to live there to learn Arabic, and who spoke beautifully about its contribution to the history of the Arab world, and of course my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who has made this a priority in his role as Chair of the International Development Select Committee. I miss Flick Drummond and Angus Robertson. Both, whenever they spoke about Yemen, made sure the House listened, and I am glad that the shadow Foreign Secretary, who is extremely busy, came to speak today. It shows that she is very concerned.

As we approach 20 December and the 1,000th day of Yemen’s war, it is clear that the conflict is still no closer to being resolved, and the United Kingdom is sadly no nearer to developing a coherent policy on Yemen. Time and again, I and others have stood in the Chamber

calling for our Government to utilise all their immense diplomatic skills, talent and muscle to bring an end to the conflict, but it has not happened, and we are here again asking for the same thing. This debate demonstrates the cross-party consensus in Parliament for an end to this awful war.

As we stand here today, Yemen continues to bleed to death. Yemenis face death from cholera, malnutrition, bombing and starvation. The cloud of death hangs over Yemen: 10,000 dead from the fighting, 40,000 mutilated; each day, 130 Yemeni children dying from preventable causes. As the hon. Member for Glasgow Central said, by the time this debate ends, another 17 Yemeni children will have died. Some 20 million people are in need of urgent humanitarian aid. By the end of the year, 1 million people will be suffering from cholera, which is more than the entire populations of Edinburgh, Newcastle and Hull combined.

The war has destroyed Yemen’s civilian infrastructure. Its hospitals—including the one where I and my sisters were born—and water sanitation facilities have been decimated by the fighting and bombing. As we have heard, state sector workers have not been paid for well over a year, and aid agencies have been asked to fulfil all major functions of the state. It is an impossible task.

The all-party parliamentary group on Yemen will be launching its inquiry into UK policy towards Yemen on 13 December—on Yemen day, to be held here in Parliament. We will hear contributions from all the agencies that have been taking part in this action of mercy: Médecins sans Frontières, Oxfam, Islamic Relief, the Norwegian Refugee Council, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Rescue Committee. I hope that many Members of the House, especially those representing the diaspora in Cardiff, Liverpool, Sheffield and elsewhere will come to Yemen day because it will allow us not just to grieve but to press for the action that, I am afraid, is still lacking.

The conflict in Yemen has raged for the past two and a half years, but there has been a sharp escalation this month. On 4 November, an Iranian-supplied missile was fired at Saudi Arabia from Houthi-controlled territory in Yemen, landing near Riyadh airport. We condemn this missile attack in the strongest possible terms. One death is not a justification for another, and targeting civilians at an airport is a cowardly act. The response by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to this attack has been quick and deadly, increasing bombing raids in Yemen and issuing a full blockade of the country. Despite an outcry from humanitarian groups and the United Nations, the full blockade lasted for three weeks. We have heard the passionate arguments that this is in breach of article 33 of the Geneva convention.

Although I welcome the ending of the blockade announced this week, acknowledge that the start of the aid has begun and welcome the update given to us by the Minister today, this is not a solution to Yemen’s problems. Aid access to the country is still far lower than is required by the 20 million people who need immediate assistance. Yemen is a country that imports 90% of its food. Restrictions on commercial imports are still present, while Yemeni citizens are starving to death. A return to the pre-November status quo is an unacceptable outcome. It is clear that the only way to stop the suffering of the Yemeni people is with a peace agreement between the parties, and I will not rest until there is peace in Yemen.

In recent months, I have been meeting some of the key interlocutors in the region. Six months ago, I went to Oman and Doha to meet Ministers there. I was on my way back to Aden, but never made it. I was told that if I landed at the airport, there was no guarantee that the plane would take off again. I have also meet the ambassador from Iran to the United Kingdom, Hamid Baeidinejad, who told me that Iran was not involved in Yemen and that Iran wanted peace. But in recent weeks, I have meet the Saudi ambassador, Mohammed bin Nawaf bin Abdulaziz, and the Saudi Foreign Minister, Adel bin Ahmed al-Jubeir, both of whom wanted peace and both of whom made it very clear that Iran was involved in supplying arms actively to the Houthis. I think we all have to accept that it is clear that that is the case.

The United Kingdom has the capacity to end this conflict as the penholder of the United Nations. It is good to see what the Prime Minister said in Riyadh today, and that she is there to address the Yemeni issue, but I would like her to stay in the region until she gets everyone back at the peace table. A speech is welcome, but it is not enough. We need to get people back and this is a huge opportunity. There is a clarion call for peace all over the world. Three weeks ago at the United States Congress, Democrat Ro Khanna and Republican Congressman Mark Pocan introduced a bipartisan Bill concerning arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Last week, the Leader of the Opposition wrote to the Prime Minister, calling for arms sales to Saudi Arabia to be suspended, and the Scottish National party has had this position for some time. On no other issue except Yemen would we see an alliance that brings together the United States Congress, the Leader of the Opposition and the Scottish National party.

Yesterday, after a long wait, the Foreign Ministers of the UK, the USA, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Oman met in the Quint meeting. But there is no timetable for peace. Unless we have a timetable, we cannot get peace. The Foreign Secretary tweeted a picture of himself after the meeting yesterday. My message to him is that we need to spend less time talking about Brexit and more time talking about Yemen. His predecessor, Lord Hague, took an active role in the peaceful transition from President Saleh to President Hadi, and I want to see this Foreign Secretary do the same.

I thank the Minister for the Middle East for his work on the issue. He is always willing to meet, engage and come to Parliament in order to update us.

There was a slight dispute between the Minister and the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield. The Minister has known him for 30 years, and I have known him for 40 years; he is responsible for my entering politics because he gave me my first speech at university, and I have not stopped since, so he is to blame. However, the fact is that the Saudi Foreign Minister did tell us that the British were there to help them with targeting the bombing. The Minister was not there, but that is exactly what the Foreign Minister said we were doing, and he thanked us for it. Maybe clarification is required on exactly what that means, but I must defend the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield: that is exactly what we all heard.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you will know that this is my 30th year in Parliament. Some may say that is too long, but for my remaining years in this place, I want to dedicate myself to ensuring that there is peace in Yemen.

I cannot bear to think of what is happening to this once beautiful country—it fills me with such pain. The images broadcast by the BBC and al-Jazeera this week are just too harrowing to watch. My children had to turn away from the television set, it was so terrible. One day, I want to return to Aden and to have breakfast on the veranda of the Crescent Hotel, overlooking the Arabian sea, where my sisters and I spent so many happy days as children, watching the great ships on their way to the Suez canal.

This is no biblical disaster, but a disaster that has been made by men. In a recent letter to the Prime Minister, I suggested that just as parliamentarians of the 20th century were judged on their reactions to the genocides in Rwanda, Kosovo and Somalia, we will be judged on our reactions to the tragedy in Yemen. Once fabled as the land of the Queen of Sheba, Yemen is now the graveyard of the middle east, and our lack of action is an object of shame for all of us. Unless we act now, the verdict of history will be very harsh indeed.

2.56 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on securing this important debate.

It has been nearly 1,000 days since the Yemen crisis started—1,000 days of suffering for the people of Yemen. Two days ago, in an attempt to help to alleviate that suffering and to reinforce what must be an unimaginable effort of humanitarian work, a UN-chartered aid ship docked in the west Yemeni port of Hodeidah. Until this crisis is resolved and the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels are defeated, we must strive to ensure that access to support humanitarian work is the norm and not the exception.

I welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has met the Saudi Government to raise those very concerns. The United Kingdom is one of the five largest bilateral aid donors to Yemen. We should be proud that the UK is leading the global response, with £155 million of UK funding providing people with food, clean water, sanitation and nutritional support. A further £8 million is being allocated to tackle the spread of cholera.

The people of Yemen are facing a horrendous famine, one that we must bring to an end. With 70% of the population requiring urgent aid, the blockade must be rolled back as much as is practical to ensure that vital assistance reaches those who need it. Without unconstrained access to shipments, hospitals will be without power, leaving the sick and injured without vital medical care, and Yemeni people could experience a long and devastating famine. We cannot allow this to happen.

I welcome the fact that the UK proposed and co-ordinated the UN Security Council presidential statement calling for uninterrupted access for humanitarian assistance into Yemen, and that the Government continue to lobby for Yemen to remain open to humanitarian access.

While I accept the necessity for the UK, alongside our allies in the US and France, to provide vital logistical and intelligence support to Saudi Arabia, which continues to lead a broad international coalition of countries from across the region, that must not come at the expense of many lives, which have been, and will continue to be, lost if this blockade continues.

[Ross Thomson]

I am pleased that the UK Government have already taken the lead by lobbying others in the international community, including at the United Nations, to ensure that humanitarian access is granted as rapidly as possible. The UK must continue to use its influence to ensure that all parties respect these clear, unified demands from around the globe.

I continue to urge the Government to make that a priority—to act and to ensure that aid reaches those in need, and to help bring about a long-lasting solution to a long-standing crisis, so that once more the people of Yemen may live safely in their country and in their homes without fear.

3 pm

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for obtaining the debate. It is important that we debate this issue, and do so frequently, such is the scale of the catastrophe. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), the Chair of the International Development Committee, for his speech, which was very illuminating, very focused, and spoke to the heart of the problem.

There are two issues—today’s crisis and tomorrow’s crisis. I believe there is a consensus in the House that today’s crisis—the blockade—must end. We must help the people of Yemen right now, irrespective of all the other issues. This is about life and death and nothing else, and that is what we should be focused on. In today’s crisis, it is imperative that the UK Government, other Governments, and all our agencies, bring pressure to bear so that the blockade is lifted, allowing aid into Yemen, so that those people in Yemen can be relieved of their suffering.

Some issues transcend today’s crisis and tomorrow’s crisis, and the blame for them cannot be laid at anyone’s door—local warlords; fights over economic assets, including oil, within the country; roadblocks; illegal taxes; theft of aid. It is a complex situation, which we must understand in order to prevent tomorrow’s crisis, because we do not want a crisis tomorrow. We must try to resolve the situation in Yemen so that the country has a future and is not in eternal crisis. That requires the conditions that people have spoken about—primarily, it requires peace. In requiring peace, and if we are to find a long-term solution, we must look at the circumstances that led to what is happening now.

I will mention some important issues that have not been raised. The Gulf Co-operation Council and the Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, were the largest donors to Yemen. They remain so today, and will continue to be so in the future. What dwarfs that fact is that what Yemen really needs is a better relationship with Saudi Arabia. The border is currently closed because of the Houthis; one of the biggest elements of Yemen’s economy is the remittances from the 1.5 million Yemeni workers who work in Saudi Arabia. They no longer work in Saudi Arabia because of this conflict; they are victims of it. Open trade has ended. The economy in Yemen is suffering. We need a relationship between Saudi Arabia—the principal partner of Yemen—and Yemen, and that is part of the future. That is part of the peace-building process.

But what has led to this conflict, and why has Saudi Arabia taken the action that it has? Although I do not agree with the blockade, I believe that we need to understand the motivation for it. Many speakers have referred to the rocket fired on 4 November, but that is only one rocket. I thought there were 54, but I am now told—and I stand to be corrected—that there have been 80 rockets. The original rockets, with a range of 1,000 km, were Scuds provided by North Korea, but we now understand that in the latest development, the rockets that are being provided into the area or supplied to the Houthis are Iranian-made—they are coming from Tehran.

If we are to resolve this situation, there needs to be demilitarisation. UN resolution 2216, which is at the heart of this, says that the Houthis must withdraw from all occupied areas; that they must relinquish all arms and military assets; that they must refrain from provocation; and that they must enter peace talks, and there are sanctions on individuals because of the actions that they have taken in the name of the Houthi-Saleh alliance. Let us look at what happened when resolution 2216 went through the United Nations, which has 15 voting members. We say that there is no alliance, and we talk about chaos, but the world was clear. Fourteen members voted for the resolution, and only one member—the Russian Federation—abstained, presumably on the principle of the intervention in Syria. No members voted against. The world was united in condemning the Houthis.

Incursions are among the provocations that Saudi Arabia faces. As I mentioned in an intervention, on the internet there are a plethora of videos showing Houthis engaging in extreme violence—killing Saudi Arabian citizens, attacking schools and killing Saudi Arabian armed forces personnel—inside Saudi Arabia. A violence surrounds the Houthis.

I was fortunate enough to meet the Iranians at the Inter-Parliamentary Union conference in St Petersburg, where they were asked about the arms that are currently in Yemen. Although the Iranians admitted that there were Iranian arms in Yemen, they said that those arms were being supplied by Hezbollah, not Iran. [Interruption.] I thought for a moment that the Minister was going to ask me to give way.

There is real concern about the evolving situation in north Yemen and the fact that the Houthis still will not come to the table, even after 70 accords and agreements. An empty chair is waiting for them, and they will not sit in it. They have no excuse for failing to engage with a process that would afford them peace talks and a path to the future prosperity of their people.

Why should we be concerned? In the BBC documentary that was filmed undercover in Sana’a, we see oppression, and we see the posters going up. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield mentioned children chanting “Death to America”, and said that that was some sort of reprisal. I think he omitted the remainder of the words on those posters and the chant that the schoolchildren were forced to sing. The chant is: “Death to America! Death to Israel! Curses upon the Jews!” I do not see that as a step along the pathway to peace, and I begin to understand why the Houthis’ chair at the table is empty. What has Israel to do with this conflict, and why should there be a curse on the Jews? How is that relevant to this conflict? It is not.

There are many other points I could make, but I want to wrap up and allow others to speak. The Houthis must be forced to come to the table, otherwise we will

not get peace. Removing the blockade and sending in as much aid as we want may solve today's crisis, but it will not solve tomorrow's. Tomorrow's crisis has to be solved by diplomacy, and that means everybody getting around the table and achieving demilitarisation. People in this House and across the world have to accept and face up to the difficulties in Yemen and start to meet the challenges.

It has been suggested today that the United States should not sell defence missile systems to Saudi Arabia. But the US Patriot missile system is a defence battery, and the 80 missiles fired by the Houthis were shot down by Patriot missile systems supplied by the United States. Is this House really saying that the United States should not have sold the missile defence systems that were used to shoot down the rockets that were fired on 4 November? I do not think so. People need to accept that the situation is very complicated. Finally, we need the Houthis to come to the table.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Although I accept that this debate on Yemen is worthy and important, the two debates that come afterwards—one of which, on RBS and the Global Restructuring Group, I am sponsoring—are also critical. A lot of people on both sides of the House want to speak in the debate that I am sponsoring, and the guillotine as it is today will leave insufficient time to give the subject the due and proper attention. With that in mind, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am prepared to pull my debate if you can speak to the Leader of the House to secure more substantial time for it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): May I say that I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman? The debate in his name that we were going to come on to is very well subscribed, and I would not want to have to curtail it because I think there is a lot to be said. I think the suggestion being offered to the House is the right one, and I will of course speak to the Leader of the House about it. More to the point, however, I have already spoken to the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, who has assured me that he will make bringing this debate back to the House a priority. I think everybody recognises that we would not want to curtail such an important debate, given the limited amount of time left, so we will absolutely speak to whoever we need to in order to make sure that time for the debate is provided. I thank the hon. Gentleman.

3.9 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for securing this incredibly important debate. I also thank him for the work he has done in the House and elsewhere in putting Yemen squarely on our agenda, and I pay a similar tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) for all the work he has done and the inquiry that he is shortly to launch.

As we have heard today, even before the conflict, Yemen was the poorest country in the region, but the war has devastated it and its infrastructure. Oxfam has reported that the ports, roads and bridges on the supply routes, along with warehouses, farms and markets have been destroyed by all sides, draining the country's food stocks. At least 10,000 civilians have already died in the conflict, and at least 40,000 have been injured.

The Saudi blockade started on 5 November, following the firing of a ballistic missile into Saudi territory from Yemen. In response to the missile, Saudi Arabia closed all land, air and sea ports in Yemen, grounded humanitarian flights and stopped all other aid for a number of weeks. The Saudi Government may have partially lifted the blockade, but vital imports of food, fuel and medicines remain severely restricted, particularly in the rebel-held north, which is home to the majority of the population.

There has been no clearance for ships containing fuel, preventing the milling and transportation of food stocks, as well as the operation of generators for health, water and sewerage systems. Humanitarian agencies need at least 1 million litres of fuel each month. Fuel shortages have shut down hospitals, and deprived entire cities of clean water and sanitation.

Aid agencies are gravely concerned about the implications of the blockade on the existing crisis, with starvation and the outbreak of diseases, including cholera and diphtheria. The conflict has had a devastating impact on civilians both directly from the violence on both sides and from its impact on Yemen's economy and critical services. As we have heard, the country has experienced the largest cholera outbreak in recent history, peaking at almost 900,000 suspected cases.

Let us be clear: Yemen is the world's worst humanitarian crisis. The country is on the brink of the world's largest famine, with 80% of the population—20.7 million people—in need of aid. As the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) pointed out so vividly, 130 children die every day in Yemen from hunger or disease, which is the equivalent of a child every few minutes.

These deaths are as senseless as they are preventable. That is the conclusion of Save the Children, which has been working in the country for some time. It has also pointed out the sheer scale of need, with Yemen requiring 350,000 metric tonnes of food imports every month, 80% of which must come through the two ports of Hodeidah and Saleef, which are currently closed.

We have heard a little more this afternoon about the relaxing of the blockades, but according to the information received to date, only a pathetically small amount of aid has got through, compared with the overall scale of need. The country's stocks of wheat and sugar will not last for longer than a few months without a full lifting of the blockade.

Opposition Members acknowledge that UK aid has been vital—it is really important that it reaches the people on the ground in Yemen—and that DFID has given £155 million. We also need to take time to pay tribute to the NGOs, including Save the Children, Oxfam and Médecins sans Frontières, that are working on the frontline to provide emergency food and other supplies. We should acknowledge their work as an advocate for the region, highlighting some of the devastating consequences not only of the conflict but of the blockade.

Oxfam has described the conflict in Yemen as the forgotten war, so we must acknowledge the important work that the aid agencies are doing in this incredibly difficult situation. Humanitarian support can only meet part of the need. We need commercial shipments to be allowed to continue.

The UK Government are the second largest donor to the UN Yemen appeal, but efforts to address the humanitarian situation and push for political progress

[*Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods*]

have unfortunately been inconsistent with the ongoing support for the actions of the Saudi-led coalition. The UK is the penholder for Yemen on the UN Security Council, as well as one of the largest donors of humanitarian aid. We are a major arms supplier to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, so we are uniquely placed to demonstrate the political leadership that is needed to bring an end to the crisis in Yemen. I listened closely to what the Minister said this afternoon. Many Opposition Members have a lot of respect for the Minister and the work that he does, but he needs to work harder to ensure that there is not an incoherence between foreign policy on Yemen and Saudi Arabia and DFID's humanitarian policies.

In the last few minutes of my speech I want to say something about what needs to happen now. The UK is a member of the Quint grouping alongside the UAE, Saudi Arabia, the US and Oman, and we led on a UN Security Council presidential statement in June, which called on all parties to engage in peace talks and allow unhindered access for humanitarian supplies. We know that a meeting took place yesterday of the Quint members, and Ministers agreed that all parties had a shared responsibility to ensure safe, rapid and unhindered access for goods and humanitarian personnel. Ministers said that they would back

“a redoubling of efforts to reach a political solution which remains the only route to ending the conflict and addressing security threats to Yemen's neighbours. Ministers recognised the need for all sides to show flexibility and abandon pre-conditions and called on the Houthis and their allies to engage the UN Special Envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed on the political process. The Ministers agreed that this urgent issue would necessitate them meeting and consulting regularly to coordinate approaches and identify concrete steps leading to a political settlement.”

The difficulty we have today is that we do not know what any of that means, so I have a few asks of the Minister. Can we have a lot more information about what the statements made after the meeting yesterday will mean in practice, including a timescale? Will the Government use their considerable leverage to ensure that the Saudi blockade is lifted immediately to let humanitarian aid flow? Will they put more effort into a new UN resolution to condemn what is going on in Yemen and ensure that progress can be made? Will the Government do all they can to ensure greater transparency about what is happening in Yemen, including greater access for aid agencies and the media?

We in this House should not put Yemen on the “too difficult” pile and get bogged down in the origins of the conflict. We should concentrate our efforts on alleviating the huge distress being caused to people in that country and work towards a political solution.

3.19 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): “A catastrophe of biblical proportions” was the phrase used by the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), a former International Development Secretary—and that was quite a statement to make. It has been adumbrated further by many right hon. and hon. Members, who have described eloquently and chillingly the miasma of despair and death that hangs over the people of Yemen.

What has alarmed me throughout this debate—I commend the right hon. Gentleman for having secured it—is that we could extract the word “Yemen” and replace it with “Syria” in so many circumstances. The two conflicts are very different, but the suffering, pain, misery and death are all too familiar in debates such as this. It is important for us not to become desensitised and that, as the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) said, we do not put Yemen into the “too difficult” box.

The other thing that alarms me—this also has parallels with Syria—is the weaponisation of food, leading to some of the most horrifying tales of hunger and deprivation, and medieval-style outbreaks of disease that are killing people in their hundreds of thousands.

I do not want to take up too much time, so I shall wind up my remarks with this point. The Prime Minister is in the region right now, as the House debates this issue. It has been said that she has raised and will raise the issue of Yemen. Of course, I would prefer she did that than otherwise—it is at least a start. But it is only a start. Like many right hon. and hon. Members, I am tired of hearing about Government Ministers raising things; I do not quite know what that means sometimes.

My first debate in the House two years ago was about the case of Raif Badawi, an imprisoned Saudi writer, and the broader issue of human rights in Saudi Arabia. I remember consulting some of the researchers from the House of Commons Library, who told me at the time that it was sometimes known for Ministers to raise issues not by verbalising their views, but by writing things on sheets of paper and holding them up so that they could be read by other people in the room.

Alistair Burt *indicated dissent.*

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The Minister shakes his head; I would not dream of accusing him of doing anything like that; I respect him as a thoughtful, good Minister. But it is about time we started to see some action. The Prime Minister should not return from her trip until she has secured something in respect of the blockade of Yemen.

Right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned arms sales to Saudi Arabia, and my party leader has also raised the issue with the Prime Minister. We get billions in arms sales to Saudi Arabia, which fill up the coffers of the Exchequer with tax receipts, yet we spend only millions on aid. I accept that we are one of the biggest donors—that, of course, is to be commended—but the aid is bastardised by the fact that we are facilitating the shelling of the very people whom we are trying to help with the aid. We find ourselves in the most perverse situation. Although I do not blame this Minister in particular for that, the situation seems to characterise British foreign policy in not only this conflict but many political situations in which we have been involved for a great many years.

I commend the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield for securing the debate, and for all the work that he does, along with the chair of the all-party group—the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who is no longer in the Chamber—and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). How much better might it be if the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield occupied the chair of the Foreign Secretary at the Cabinet table, rather than the person who occupies it now?

3.24 pm

Alistair Burt: With the leave of the House, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will respond. I will take no more than the two minutes allotted to me, so that my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) can make some closing remarks. I thank him again for raising the issue. I also thank other colleagues for the way in which they have dealt with the debate and the constructive way in which nearly all of them spoke.

We are agreed that we want immediate access for humanitarian and commercial aid to the ports in Yemen. I do not want to dance on the head of a pin when it comes to the word “blockade”: that is what colleagues have called it in the House, and that is what it is. There are international rules governing whether something is a blockade. International humanitarian law prevents the starvation of civilians “as a method of warfare”, and that includes blockading with the intent of causing starvation. The publicly made statement by the Saudis was that their intent is not to cause starvation but to ensure that missiles do not enter Yemen. I would be failing in my duty if I did not put that on the record, and, as we have seen, there has been an easing in recent days.

What we are all agreed on, however, is first that we want that greater access, and secondly that we want an end to the conflict. I have sought to assure colleagues that we are straining every sinew in our efforts to assist in a process of which we are not fully in control, and in which not all parties are yet engaged in the same way as the coalition parties are engaged with the UN.

Finally, let me commend my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, who has made securing access to humanitarian aid one of her top priorities in Yemen. We have been feeding millions of people, and we are determined to continue to do so. We are providing food for 1.8 million people for at least a month, nutritional support for 1.7 million people, and water and sanitation for 1.2 million. The country is doing what it can on the aid side. As we all know, however, commercial access has to be granted. We need more food; we need an end to the urgency of the situation. We also need to support those who are trying to ensure that a legitimate Government are protected against those from outside and from internal insurgency. We need to bend all our efforts to resolving the conflict, and the United Kingdom will do so to the very best of its ability.

3.27 pm

Mr Mitchell: I will not take up much of the House’s time, Mr Deputy Speaker.

This has been a most useful debate. I think that there is agreement across the House on two key things. First, the British Government must do everything they can to ensure that the blockade is lifted, because it is a breach

of international humanitarian law. It is a collective punishment beating for the 27 million people who live in Yemen, and it must be lifted. Secondly—and here the British Government have a most important role to play—a political process that is inclusive must get going. Those are the two key messages that I hope the Minister will take back to the Foreign Office today.

In different ways, nearly every speaker on both sides of the House drew attention to the fault line in the Government’s current policy, and it was set out with exemplary clarity by the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) a few moments ago. It makes those two objectives more difficult to achieve, but they are the objectives that I hope the Minister will take away with him, and the whole House will wish him all success in achieving them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the current situation in Yemen.

Ross Thomson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Tomorrow the House is due to debate the Second Reading of a private Member’s Bill, the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill. Unfortunately I was unable to find a copy this morning, because the Bill was being reprinted as it contained an error. The error was that Scotland had been omitted from it.

I am told that the Bill is being reprinted to include Scotland, and that it will be available at some point today. May I ask whether the House will be able to debate it tomorrow, given that printed copies have not been made available in good time? May I also ask whether you understand, Mr Deputy Speaker, that Her Majesty’s official Opposition no longer consider Scotland to be important enough to be named alongside England, Wales and Northern Ireland in important pieces of potential legislation?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): The hon. Gentleman was doing all right until the end of his remarks, when he ruined a very good point of order. The Opposition are not in charge of printing, so I think the hon. Gentleman will regret the comments he added on to the end, as there was no need to make them. However, it is important that we get things right, and there has been a printing error. We will be able to hold the debate tomorrow, however; I can reassure the hon. Gentleman of that—do not book a flight, as we will be here tomorrow. The debate will take place, and Scotland is included. This was just a printing error, so we need not worry and should not try to make political points out of what was a very good point of order up until then.

One of the Backbench Business Committee debates has been withdrawn, so we will now debate the motion on mental health and suicide within the autism community.

Autism Community: Mental Health and Suicide

3.30 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the support available for autistic people experiencing mental health problems; calls on the Government to ensure that the NICE-recommended indicator for autism in GP registers is included in the Quality and Outcomes Framework; and further calls on the Government to ensure NHS England works closely with the autism community to develop effective and research-based mental health pathway.

I thank everyone across the House, no matter what side of the Chamber they sit on, who supported the application for this important debate to the Backbench Business Committee. It is truly a cross-party endeavour to raise the profile of this issue, awareness of mental health issues within the autism community, difficulties about access to services, the importance of funding adequate support, and the progress we all must make across the UK for this population.

I thank the many autism charities, mental health charities and research groups that have reached out to me over the past few weeks.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady join me in thanking the Whole Autism Family, a charity run by Anne-Marie and Martin Kilgallon in my constituency, who have two autistic boys and who do so much to support other families, who can find it difficult to access medical and other healthcare?

Dr Cameron: I thank the hon. Lady for her important words. The bedrock of much of the work undertaken across the UK is such small charities, often run by those who have personal experience and know what works and what needs to be done.

The level of interest in the debate shows the importance of the issue. It is important to so many across the UK, including charities such as those already mentioned. Many charities have contacted me with important recommendations, including Autistica, the National Autistic Society, the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the British Psychological Society.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Will she join me in congratulating women's organisations in Coventry that are very much involved in mental health issues among younger people and older people in particular? What help can they get? Often, women act as carers and the Government should do something about that and give proper grants to those organisations.

Dr Cameron: That is an extremely important point. We must bear it in mind that for young people with autistic spectrum disorder, there is often a family-systemic approach, with carers at the forefront of providing support, and they need the best resources possible.

I also thank the many citizens from across these isles who have contacted me to give their own poignant personal accounts. These accounts have been harrowing to read—and more harrowing for them to experience—and make us realise just how absolutely vital this debate is.

I also want to extend a personal warm welcome to the youth patrons up in the Gallery today representing Ambitious About Autism. Their recent campaign and research project, “Know your normal”, has been helping many people and raising important awareness. I pay specific thanks to the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan), who have worked tremendously hard on this debate, on behalf of people with autistic spectrum disorder, through the all-party group over many years.

As a psychologist, I know that progress has been made on autism and mental health over the many years since I started in 1990, when waiting lists were extremely long—possibly a year and more—and services were very limited. However, much more must be done across the United Kingdom.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I accept the point that the hon. Lady is making, but I have to tell her that waiting lists in Durham are still two years long.

Dr Cameron: That is an excellent point, and that situation is clearly unacceptable. The Scottish Government and the United Kingdom Government are introducing waiting times initiatives across the United Kingdom. We are finding that the experience on the ground for young people with autism and their families, and indeed across the lifespan, is that, despite the waiting times initiatives, the waiting times that are expected to be in place are not the reality. We need to address that issue seriously.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree that mental health issues for adults with autism can arise out of the way in which they are treated when they encounter the criminal justice system? The behaviours that sometimes accompany autism can be misinterpreted by people in the criminal justice system. Does she agree that we need not only to get the health provision right but to ensure that the people working in the criminal justice system understand about autism and take it into account when they meet adults with the condition?

Dr Cameron: Yes, I wholeheartedly agree with that point. I have personal clinical experience of that through working across a variety of secure hospitals and prisons in my practice with the NHS. People with autistic spectrum disorder often find themselves caught up in the criminal justice system, which has little awareness of their needs or of the support that they require. When they get caught up in the system, it is difficult for them to move on and rehabilitate because the provision simply is not there.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Following on from the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), there is an argument that the police lack the training to handle some of these young people because they do not understand the nature of their mental illness. Does the hon. Lady agree that something needs to be done to provide the police with the necessary training?

Dr Cameron: I agree. Our police are on the frontline and they deserve the utmost respect for the work they do, but yes, it is correct to say that they require further

training and also further support. There requires to be a clearer pathway when people exhibit challenging behaviours in the community, from the point at which the police are put into contact with them right through to the provision of adequate support in the health system, without their being caught up in the criminal justice system in between.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The hon. Lady will be aware that the societal body that is most likely to come into contact with someone who is likely to take their own life is the police. The police, and particularly the British Transport police, are doing critical work in assessing how staff can be trained to identify potential suicides and to take action to take people back at a time of crisis in their life in order to prevent them from taking forward a suicide. We should not knock the police too much. They are doing fantastic work in this area.

Dr Cameron: I wholeheartedly agree. As I said, the police are on the frontline. They face the crux of the matter when it comes to matters of life or death. They are doing their very best with the training and resources that they have, but there requires to be a clearer pathway so that people who are at that crisis stage can access health services—and probably crisis health services—and so that the police have somewhere to ensure that the clinical needs of those people are met. It is unfair for our police to have to take care of people's clinical needs when that is not what their training provides for.

In 2016, an academic study in Sweden, which was published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, found that people with autistic spectrum disorder were nine times more likely to die by suicide than the rest of the population. The latest research indicates that people with autistic spectrum disorder account for a harrowing proportion of suicides in the UK. There is a 16-year gap in life expectancy between people with autistic spectrum disorder and the general population. To put it all very bluntly, people with autistic spectrum disorder are 28 times more likely to consider suicide than the average population—28 times. The statistics make one thing abundantly clear: what we are doing now to support people with autistic spectrum disorder is not working and is not enough. Research shows that almost seven in 10 people with autistic spectrum disorder experience mental health issues, including anxiety and depression. Services must be in place to ensure that people are cared for holistically. We have to meet all their clinical needs, which may mean their autism or their learning difficulties, but they will almost certainly have mental health issues. Quite frankly, we do not have services in place today that take account of the complexity of such needs.

What types of things are going wrong for people at the frontline? It is difficult for people with autistic spectrum disorder to access mental health support through the usual routes. For most of us, that might mean going to our GP as a first point of contact for primary care for mental health problems, but a GP practice is a daunting, unfamiliar place for people with autistic spectrum disorder. One young man wrote to me and described a recent trip, saying that it was

“quite hard for me to access the GP anyway. The whole environment is difficult. It's noisy, there's often children, it's very hot. There's also a loud beep when they call the next person that I find really quite painful. When you're feeling emotionally poorly that becomes almost impossible.”

GP surgeries make reasonable adjustments for wheelchair users every day—simple changes that make the life of the patient easier—so the same policies should be implemented for people with autistic spectrum disorder. We need training to raise GP awareness. Access needs to be easier. We need to ensure that GPs know who on their register has a diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder.

If an autistic person bypasses the GP and goes straight to mental health services, they may face unprecedented waiting times or they may simply be refused treatment. When individuals do attend services, they may find that they are discharged without any follow-up. At the Health Committee last week, we heard how a young autistic boy was turned away by child and adolescent mental health services four times, despite feeling suicidal, because he had not yet attempted to take his own life. Things have hit crisis point, and we need to ensure that we engage in prevention. Someone attempting to take their own life should not be the point at which they receive treatment. We need early intervention to pinpoint the symptoms of difficulty and where we should be aiming the treatment.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this very important debate. We both sit on the Health Committee, and during the inquiry into suicide prevention we heard that the point at which someone is most likely to take their own life is, tragically, when they are discharged from in-patient care. The Committee's recommendation was that everyone should be contacted within at least three days, and we are waiting for the Government to respond that. Does she agree that everything should be done to ensure that the most vulnerable, including people with autistic spectrum disorder, should be supported in that period when they are extremely vulnerable to ensure that they do not take their own life?

Dr Cameron: I agree. That is an extremely valid point. If people arrive at A&E for crisis intervention and are admitted for a period of time, it is important that they are discharged with some follow-up. People often return to the same circumstances that led to the difficulties in the first place, and if they do not have some support to deal with those difficult circumstances, they may be in a vulnerable situation and may try to self-harm or take their own life once again.

If a person with autistic spectrum disorder feels unable to go to the GP or to reach out to services in their local community, they might try to ring a suicide helpline. However, that can be extremely difficult in itself for a person with autistic spectrum disorder who finds communication and social interaction difficult. They might be able to verbalise only some of their difficulties, and they may then find there is no follow up from that service, either. Early access points and early intervention are crucial to preventing suicide and preventing mental health problems being exacerbated. Much more has to be done at that critical early intervention stage to ensure access to services.

If a person with autistic spectrum disorder reaches a health professional, they often find that their mental health problems are overlooked or misdiagnosed, which might be because they present an extremely complex case. They might also have concomitant learning difficulties, and they might not present the symptomatology that would usually be expected for anxiety or depression per se because

[*Dr Cameron*]

their symptoms are complicated by their autistic spectrum disorder. It is extremely important that mental health practitioners have training in autistic spectrum disorder, in the types of presentation that they might need to identify and, particularly, in risk issues.

Diagnosis is still a postcode lottery. I hope to continue working with the Minister on that issue, because we need an understanding of who is appropriately trained in diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder and what level of specialty we have in different professions. What is the workforce plan to ensure that this very great need is addressed across our society? This is so important. People with autistic spectrum disorder say they do not know where to go locally. As a member of the Select Committee on Health, I have asked services about that, and they say, "We don't really have a map of who can diagnose and who can provide specialist intervention in a given area of NHS England." Streamlined services would make it so much easier for people to gain that initial access.

I do not want to take up the whole debate, so I will provide a brief overview before letting others speak. Many Members want to contribute to this important debate, but I wish to touch on a few other important issues.

I request that the Minister look at what mental health therapies work specifically for people with autistic spectrum disorder who have concomitant mental health difficulties. There is no adequate research base yet, but we know it is critical—it is lifesaving—so we need to prioritise funding. Traditional mental health therapies might not work in the same way for people with autistic spectrum disorder. If one of us presented at a GP surgery, we might be offered cognitive behavioural therapy, but we do not know whether that is the best option for a person with autistic spectrum disorder, or whether some kind of adapted therapy would be more appropriate. That important work should be undertaken, and undertaken quickly, to engage people in appropriate therapies and save lives.

I have been contacted by a couple of individuals whose poignant accounts have struck me. One is an individual from my constituency who says that she has continually tried to access CAMHS for her daughter, who has been repeatedly self-harming. It has placed the family in such a stressful situation over a lengthy period that the family, including the mother and carers, now feel that their own mental health is under stress.

It is extremely important that we ensure not just that individuals can access the system but that we preserve family life, that we support carers and families, and that we do not place an additional burden on the NHS and other services. Families and parents may go on to develop their own depression and anxiety when dealing with an intractable situation because they do not know how to cope. If we do not address the problem at its root, we will multiply the problem for services across the UK.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I met a number of carers some months ago, and one thing that struck me was that from time to time they were extremely distressed. Some of them could not afford a holiday and they do not get very much help, to say the least,—they are not even paid as carers—so there is an effect on the mental health of the carers sometimes as well.

Dr Cameron: Yes, that is exactly the point I am making. We are exacerbating the problem for families, and they are at grave risk of having their own mental health difficulties or separations if placed under significant stresses over a period of time. Such things can be avoided if supports are put in at an early stage, and we can address the difficulties and give them the help they need in that way.

The other case that struck me this week was that of an individual who contacted me last night to say that they hoped this debate would make a difference. They had been struggling for a long time to access services for their daughter, who had been self-harming over many years and in the past few weeks had tried to throw herself on to a dual carriageway under a number of cars. She had been feeling at crisis point—breaking point—and had been feeling isolated, having a lack of peer support and of clinical help at the time of need. This individual had been discharged from CAMHS a number of times after referral for assessment. I understand that if an individual comes to a CAMHS service and does not fit a diagnosis initially, it can be difficult to think of the types of services or follow-up they need, and they may be discharged. However, that has to be looked at, because young people in this situation have grave clinical need. They might not fit a clinical or diagnostic box, but they do have clinical needs that require following up. These young individuals are falling through the gaps, and this family was concerned that their young person would literally be falling under a car and they would be losing them for good. That just cannot be something we allow to happen in today's society. As I say, this is a crucial issue—it will be life-saving if the Minister can show the leadership that we need today.

The five year forward view for mental health recommends that NHS England should develop a referral-to-treatment pathway for people with autistic spectrum disorder. That would be a vital step, as things are too complicated; people do not know where to access services and they do not know where to go. Even the services themselves do not know the best route forward for people after they present, so this has to be streamlined and we need to see progress in this regard.

As has been mentioned, we also need to look not only at children with autistic spectrum disorder but across the lifespan, at adults. It is very important that adults who may have autistic spectrum disorder have access to a diagnosis in the first place, and that if they present with mental health issues they are able to receive the support they need. This care pathway has to straddle the lifespan, so that none of our constituents, right across the UK, fall through these gaps.

It will be important to ensure that we undertake the GP registers, which are recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, whereby individuals with autism are highlighted to GPs on these registers so that they can signpost them to correct supports. That is an extremely important issue. Last time this issue was debated, the Minister at the time said that the Government were "open" to these suggestions about the registers, and it would be important to hear an update on that today.

The Scottish Government have launched their own Scottish strategy for autism in 2011, declaring autism a "national priority". I concur with that, as it is a national priority. This means more than simply diagnosing autism; it means that we must think about people with autistic

spectrum disorder right across our communities, and about their access to services, to community services and to shopping centres—their access to society at large. This is bigger than just health, so I would like to know how the Minister is going to liaise with other Departments to make sure that we do not leave people with autism behind and to ensure that that message is embedded in all Government policy.

I have written to the Scottish Government to ask for an update, because I have read their policy thoroughly and it is extremely good, but constituents still contact me to say that, with respect to the implementation on the ground, they are having the same difficulties accessing services and that things are not working as they should. Perhaps the Scottish, Welsh and UK Governments can work together to ensure that best practice is in place for people with autism right across the United Kingdom.

I really hope that the Minister will listen to at least some of the recommendations raised in this debate. Other Members from all parties will have extremely important accounts to give. I welcome all the accounts given and interventions made. This is a vital issue of concern, so it is important that we work together, across party lines, to ensure that people with autistic spectrum disorder and mental health problems do not fall through the gaps but have the services they deserve.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. As the House knows, we have limited time this afternoon, so we have to start with a time limit of seven minutes for Back-Bench speeches.

3.55 pm

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It is a pleasure and honour to speak in this debate, secured by the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), because it is such an important issue. It is critical to make sure that those on the autistic spectrum are absolutely wrapped up in our mental health and medical services so that we no longer need even to raise this issue in the House. To that effect, the Government have put mental health on the political agenda as no Government have before. We have invested more in mental health than any previous Government, hired tens of thousands of staff and, most importantly, enshrined the parity of esteem of mental and physical health into law. The Prime Minister took a big step forward last month by opening a review of the Mental Health Act 1983, because too many people are still suffering discrimination.

Luciana Berger: I do not seek to be partisan in these sorts of debates, but it is important to note for the record that the amendment to introduce parity of esteem for mental health into the Health and Social Care Act 2012 was tabled by Labour peers in the House of Lords, and unfortunately Tory peers voted against it. I would not like the Government to seek to claim credit for the fact that parity of esteem is now enshrined in law.

Mrs Trevelyan: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments.

Despite the cross-party efforts of all those for whom this is a passionate policy area—for 18 years I have cared for my son, who is now a young adult with autism—there

are some people who are having a miserable time in the mental health system and are not yet benefiting from improved access to core therapies and services: men and women throughout the country on the autistic spectrum. We must do better.

Across the board, a quarter of us will experience mental ill health during our lives, but within the autism community that rises to eight in 10—of those diagnosed as autistic, eight in 10 suffer from mental ill health. To those of us familiar with autism, that is sadly not a surprise. Society is designed for us neuro-typicals, as my son likes to call me—I am not sure it is meant as a compliment—so almost everything designed for us can cause stress or worry for those who are wired differently. A different perspective on the world has huge potential benefits for our society and economy, and we fail all those on the autistic spectrum to the detriment of not only the individual but society more widely.

We are failing these individuals. When I did some research for this debate—as I always do, if I can, for anything relating to this subject—I was appalled to discover the scale of suicide across the autism community. Autistica, the UK's autism research charity, revealed international findings that autistic people without a learning disability are nine times more likely to die by suicide than the rest of the population. The charity's research is now beginning to uncover almost identical rates in the UK as it starts to build the research database. As a parent, that is just awful to hear; but as an MP, it is a rallying cry. The exact causes are still being researched. We live in a complex environment and people are complex anyway. If we stick them in an environment that is often alien, it is not surprising that it is sometimes too hard to cope.

There are three clear ways in which our mental health services are letting our autistic citizens down now, and we have a duty to address them. First, we know that autistic people's mental health problems are often misdiagnosed or missed completely. Despite mental health problems being the norm, there are no systematic mental health checks for autistic people. These problems can often present very differently, partly because so many become practised at masking their feelings to fit in. If someone is severely autistic, it is perhaps almost easier to identify them as sufferers, but those who are managing to live in a mainstream environment have learned some extraordinarily clever, adaptable ways to cope with our neuro-typical world and to their own very severe mental ill health. What is truly traumatic for one autistic person might not be for another, so when they do seek help, as the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow highlighted, autistic people can often find that their worries are dismissed out of hand. They are missed or misunderstood.

The NHS Five Year Forward View for mental health recommends the development of autistic-specific care pathways for mental ill health. That work, as I understand it, is supposed to begin in 2018, but we have heard nothing about it since February. Perhaps the Minister will be kind enough to update us on the project: is it still taking place; who is leading it; what is its scope; and how will autistic people be involved in helping to design it to make sure that we are not missing some very obvious things? Those things might not necessarily be obvious to those of us who are neuro-typical, but we must think in the different way that our wonderful

[Mrs Trevelyan]

autistic community so often does. This is a crucial opportunity to begin transforming care for autistic people, but we must get it right.

Secondly, we know that autistic people can struggle to find the support that works for them. It is assumed that what works for us neuro-typicals will also work for them. Autistic people may benefit from cognitive behavioural therapy but, as the hon. Lady who is an expert in providing such support says, being made to group work with strangers can be entirely counter-productive. We need to think about how we can adjust that support. The idea that someone who has issues with understanding, with being able to read faces, with processing information would in any way feel supported when they are in a state of deep stress shows a complete gap in understanding. The stresses and the symptomatic problems of people with autism make it more difficult for them to cope.

Dr Cameron: The hon. Lady is making an extremely powerful speech, as she is speaking from very personal experience, which is extremely valuable in this Chamber. I have also heard some disturbing accounts in the past few weeks of people with autistic spectrum disorder being referred to group-based therapies, which also shows a lack of awareness of symptoms, as they have issues with being able to interact socially and to communicate. That would place an individual with autistic spectrum disorder under even greater stress than if they underwent a different form of therapy.

Mrs Trevelyan: I absolutely agree. I work closely in my constituency with the families who are supporting their autistic children. Clearly, dealing with strangers, with the unfamiliar, and with group dynamics is possibly one of the most difficult things to ask an autistic young person—or indeed an older person—to take on.

We have for too long neglected the research into mental health therapies for our autistic community, even though that tops the list of research priorities if we ask those in that sector. I very much hope that the Government will look to support those who are doing this work. In our manifesto, we said that we

“will address the need for better treatments across the whole spectrum of mental health conditions”—

by—

“making the UK the leading research and technology economy in the world for mental health, bringing together public, private and charitable investment.”

I support those words wholeheartedly and hope that the Minister will be encouraging and will help us to do much more.

Thirdly, let me mention NHS data gathering—this is an issue that comes up in any number of NHS-related debates, but it is critical in this one. GPs are so often the first port of call for those with mental ill health. Going to a GP can be really, really difficult for autistic people. It is an environment with unfamiliar lighting, sounds and rules that cannot be escaped. The hon. Lady's example of a bell going off is a classic one. It is the unfamiliarity and the pitch of the unexpected sound. There is a lack of understanding by neuro-typicals about what certain pitches of sound can do to those who have hyper-sensitivities. To an autistic young boy or girl, it can be like a bomb going off. We need to consider the impact of such things on those with these

heightened sensitivities, especially when they are in a strange place and already in a state of anxiety. Strip lighting in public spaces is another thing that creates enormous tension.

Paula Sherriff: The hon. Lady is making an incredibly powerful speech. Some supermarkets, including Sainsbury's, do an autism hour—every month, I think—which is great, as it provides literature in store for people, and staff also gain a better understanding. If a child or young person is having a meltdown, people should not think automatically that they are naughty but consider that they might be experiencing difficulties relating to their autism.

Mrs Trevelyan: The hon. Lady is exactly right. I have experienced many times the meltdown of a small child in a supermarket aisle and had people either offer a word of support or—usually—criticise me for being a bad parent. The line I always used was, “You tell me when you have an autistic child and take them shopping, and I'll tell you what the problem is”. It is very difficult to understand. We need to provide places of calm. Cinemas do it, and we can do it too. I ask that the Minister take this forward and take on the challenge of getting those quality and outcomes frameworks to work so that our GPs can provide the support that people need.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I do not criticise the hon. Lady for having taken interventions—that is the stuff of debate, and a lot of people want to intervene—but it means we now have to go down to five minutes per person.

4.6 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for bringing this debate before us and the hon. Member for East Kilbride etc. (Dr Cameron) for leading on it. I also wish to say a special thank you to Mr Speaker and Mrs Bercow, who have done so much to support autism awareness in the House and beyond, particularly through their support for the National Autistic Society.

I should make a declaration of personal interest: I have a young cousin on the autistic spectrum, and I am married to someone who runs a special educational school for people with autism. My constituency team has also prioritised making Bristol an autism-friendly city. We have made a start, but we have more to do. We have held a training event for employers on how to make reasonable adjustments in recruitment and employment practices, and have had training for my team and made some adjustments ourselves.

That matters because unemployment is unacceptably high among people with autism, which contributes to mental ill health. According to the National Autistic Society, only 16% of adults with autism are in full-time paid work, and only 32% are in some kind of paid work, compared with 47% of disabled people and 80% of non-disabled people, and we know that unemployment affects mental health and self-esteem. The Government have committed to halving this autism employment gap by the end of this Parliament. In the interests of the mental health of people on the autistic spectrum, I urge the Minister to urge her colleagues to do everything they can to meet that much-needed target.

I have heard from schools in my constituency that funding pressures are affecting their specialist provision for children with special educational needs and mental health problems. Some families have told me that they have experienced effective or partial exclusion from school because of a lack of understanding of autism or of specialist support. That in turn leads to further mental health problems and is exacerbated by a lack of autism-focused specialist mental healthcare and high demand for mental healthcare generally. They have also told me of brilliant support and help from some teachers and schools, but they have fears about staff changes and worries about funding.

I have talked to public venues about what they can do with the help of the National Autistic Society and others to make themselves more autism-friendly. It cannot be acceptable that, according to the Royal College of Psychiatrists' briefing for this debate, autistic people are more than seven times more likely than non-autistic people to commit suicide and that so many young people on the spectrum have at least one anxiety disorder. None of us wants to accept this, and we do not have to, and there is much we can do.

As I have said, my team has made autism a priority. In association with the fantastic Bristol Autism Support service and the local branch of the National Autistic Society, we recently held what we think was the country's first MP constituency surgery specifically for adults with autism and parents of children on the autistic spectrum. I encourage all colleagues to do likewise, and I am happy to talk to them about how we did it. It meant that adults with autism and the parents of children with autism could come and tell us about challenges they faced with simple things such as transport and public spaces, as well as housing and employment, all of which affect mental health.

I am not going to repeat things that hon. Members have already said, particularly the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and so on—I am so sorry, I cannot pronounce the last bit.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Lesmahagow.

Thangam Debbonaire: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The hon. Lady comprehensively listed recommendations that I urge the Minister to follow. I will finish by recommending two things. First, I suggest that hon. Members who care about autism and the 1% of our population who are on the autism spectrum consider, as I have done, asking a member of staff to champion that cause. I work closely with my member of staff, Councillor Mike Davies, who is our local autism lead on the council and within my own team. He has patiently taught me a great deal about how to make Bristol a truly autism-friendly city. We have a lot more to do, but I know that, with someone like Mike, I will be able to do much more than I would otherwise have done.

Secondly, I would like us to take a leap. In the House restoration and renewal programme, we could decide to work with the National Autistic Society to make this place autism-friendly. Doing so would help not just people on the autistic spectrum, including children and their parents, but all of us. It would make the place calmer, more welcoming and truly more accessible for everyone. It would be the mother of Parliaments leading

by example to the rest of the country so that we can truly make the United Kingdom autism-friendly and address the chronic levels of mental ill health and suicide risk for people on the autism spectrum. I recommend that colleagues consider the suggestions that have been made by me and my team, and by others in this House.

4.11 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire). She talked of having a constituency surgery exclusive to those who are on the spectrum. I actually had that pleasure last week, although it was not something that I fixed. It was just that everyone who booked an appointment had issues and was on the spectrum. That is telling about how much pressure MPs rightly face from our constituents who have such huge challenges.

I thank the hon. Member for East Kilbride and other parts of her constituency that are harder to say for securing this debate. It is a real pleasure to have the debate, because it is timed very well, coinciding with a report that has been published by the all-party parliamentary group on autism entitled "Autism and education in England 2017". The report is particularly relevant because, when it comes to mental health and those on the autism spectrum, I am afraid to say that much starts to go wrong in schools, which are still not equipped to deal with the many people who face complex issues that arise from autism.

It was a pleasure for me to co-chair the parliamentary inquiry that led to the report with my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield). We had three inquiries in Parliament, and we heard from young people on the spectrum, parents and educational experts about where things were not working and where they could work better. The report is a positive one that discusses what could be done better, and that is not just down to money; it is a question of sharing best practice. Unfortunately, the reality of the current situation in schools is that less than 50% of the thousands of people who responded to our request for information felt happy at school, which meant that they felt uncomfortable at school. Fewer than 50% of teachers felt that they were equipped to deal with pupils who have autism. A lot of this comes down to a lack of training that many teachers have.

It is fantastic that the Government will ensure that initial teacher training includes autism awareness, but there are many teachers—including headteachers—who have already been through teacher training and are now teaching in schools but do not have sufficient understanding of the needs of autistic children. That can go wrong for the autistic child, and indeed their parents, by leading to exclusion. Of course, exclusion then leads to isolation, and isolation leads to mental ill health and, dare I say it, suicide. That is where we can do better. Unfortunately, an autistic child at school is three times more likely to be excluded than those who are not on the spectrum.

We need more training in schools and better sharing of good practice. It should not just be the case that specialist schools have all the expertise. If 70% of all pupils who are on the spectrum are in mainstream schools, we need the specialist schools to share what they know with the mainstream schools. Only when we start to tackle that will we actually do better.

[Huw Merriman]

I was delighted that the Government welcomed the report. We are now very much looking for them to support the recommendations in it. It will be launched by the all-party group at the beginning of next year, and I very much hope that all right hon. and hon. Members who are here today will come along and support us.

In the time I have left, I want to touch on the many challenges faced by those who have left the school system and are now in the workplace. One of the people who came to my constituency surgery last week wanted to talk about the struggles he has connecting with his jobcentre. I have committed to go along with him, meet the new work coaches we have through the roll-out of universal credit, see the application process and see how he can follow it through.

I am particularly pleased that the Government are now looking at tailoring support for those struggling to enter the workplace, recognising that those left seeking jobs have individual needs, and are looking to ensure that individual specialists are in place in jobcentres, including those ready to help people with mental health difficulties.

I want to again ring the bell for what we can do better in schools, so that we can support them to make sure that the issue of mental health for those on the spectrum is recognised. We must also absolutely believe that we can all do better, across parties.

4.15 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): First, I thank the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron)—sorry for my pronunciation—for her thoughtful and comprehensive speech, and for setting out the difficulties that people with autism face. I am tempted to say, “What she said,” but I do not think that does justice to the situation.

I just want to touch on a few points. Earlier this year I met Autistica, a charity that does research into autism. If other hon. Members have not seen its report “Personal tragedies, public crisis”, which looks into why people with autistic spectrum disorders die early—up to 16 years early, as the hon. Lady said—I would encourage them to do so. It makes shocking reading. The key points include the point that autism in itself is not a mental health problem, but that eight out of 10 autistic people will face mental health difficulties, such as anxiety and depression. Four out of 10 children with autism have two or more mental health problems. The research also shows that suicide is a leading cause of death among people with autism. Autistic adults without a learning disability are nine times more likely than others to die by suicide, and autistic adults with a learning disability are twice as likely to be die by suicide. Those are shocking figures. Suicide is preventable, and we need to do much more to reduce those figures.

We also need to recognise some of the specific problems people face. As other Members have said, many mental health problems can look different in autistic people. We need to recognise that and make sure that the issue is addressed, and that people have the appropriate treatments and are dealt with properly.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is quoting from an excellent piece of research, but is she aware that the autism commission I chair has

conducted a piece of work about the spectrum of obstacles and the difficulty that people with autism face in getting through to the right people in the health service? Those two pieces of research are so powerful.

Liz Twist: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I absolutely agree that the two pieces of work go together and can help us to improve services for people with autism spectrum disorders.

As others have said, it is becoming increasingly obvious that some mental health therapies are not right for people with autism and do not work in the same ways as they do for other people, and we need to do more research into those areas.

It can be difficult for autistic people to approach services for support, and we have already heard about the issues with going to a GP surgery. Autistic people and their families are also left fighting the system too often, because information is not shared.

We need to do a number of things. First, as others have said, we need to diagnose autism much earlier so that appropriate interventions may be offered to people with autism and their families. Secondly, we need to record people who have autism on GP records and collect data so that we can identify the issues and develop appropriate services. It is good that, in the Westminster Hall debate in September, the Government committed to gathering data. I hope the Minister can update us on progress on that.

Next, it would be useful to hear from the Minister what progress is being made on developing the autism care pathway proposed in the “Five Year Forward View for Mental Health”, and whether it will address suicide specifically.

There is concern that suicide prevention measures are not well designed for autistic people. I hope that the Minister will look at what needs to be done differently to reach and support autistic people in crisis.

Finally, none of the recent cross-Government suicide prevention strategies makes reference to autism. Given that we now know that the risk of suicide is so high in the autism community, and that there are very different issues to be considered, as we have heard, will the Minister commit to ensuring that the next strategy looks directly at how to help autistic people in crisis?

4.20 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I join right hon. and hon. Members in congratulating the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) on securing the debate, and thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. The hon. Lady pointed out, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), that the percentage of people who take their own life is nine times greater among people with autism than the general population. As my hon. Friend said, autism is linked to depression and anxiety.

I welcome the debate because it is another example of this House talking about mental health. People know that I think the more we talk about it, the better the debate gets. I think people should be congratulated on that. I place on the record my thanks to the charities and the army of volunteers who work with adults and children with autism, because they are unsung heroes.

I want to raise two points. One is about waiting times; the other, which the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow raised, is about how we develop pathways. In Durham, we currently have a two-year waiting list for autism diagnosis. I have tried to get to the bottom of why that is. It is only when you meet some of the parents of the young people that you see what a tragedy it is. The pressure on those families is so great that I suspect some are developing mental health issues. I am really concerned about the lost opportunity for those children, because everyone only gets one chance at education, and there are cases where children have been out of school for nearly a year, waiting for diagnosis. I am aware, as I think we all are, of the pressures that there are on child and adolescent mental health services and social services, but we must try to streamline the pathway to early diagnosis.

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) spoke about schools. The most appalling thing I have seen is that a school excluded a child with autism, even though he had a diagnosis, because “he was too difficult”—and clearly affecting the league tables. We should monitor that, because it is a disgrace. Thankfully, the local authority stepped in and put that right, but the pressure on that parent and the child is unacceptable.

We are talking about mental health and a Health Minister will reply to the debate, but this issue is wider than just health. We have made great strides in terms of parity of esteem, and the point that the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) made is right. We are winning that battle. Now we need to win the next battle, and that is how we hardwire mental wellbeing into public policy. That is not just health; it is education, housing, social care, local authorities—

Liz Twist: And employment.

Mr Jones: And employment, as my hon. Friend says from a sedentary position.

There is another big problem that a lot of individuals with autism encounter. They go through the school system. Education finishes and they transition into work. I know of quite a few examples of this from my constituency. A lot of these young people, who are perfectly capable of engaging in some type of employment, seem to get lost in the system. The pathway that the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow mentioned must therefore continue from diagnosis all the way through an individual’s life and involve a cross-section of services, not just health. To get that idea hard-wired into the system, the Government must make sure that, from Cabinet Committee level downwards, consideration of mental health and mental wellbeing forms part of the process of policy making in each Department. The last Labour Government did something similar with veterans.

Kevin Brennan: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, because I know that time is short. Does he agree that those Cabinet Committee-style discussions should involve ensuring that the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office understand the ways in which people with autism come into contact with the criminal justice system and understand the behaviours—such as stimming, which is often misinterpreted and ends up with people being arrested—that those individuals exhibit?

Mr Jones: I totally agree, because autism is not just a health issue. The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed made a very good point. How many times have we seen people reacting to a child in a supermarket kicking off, as it were, with no recognition of the fact that the child is on the autism spectrum or of the challenges that that poses for the parents? We need to hard-wire that idea in.

The Government also need to look at health funding. I accept that they have committed to more funding for mental health, but the system that was set up in the Health and Social Care Act 2012—I hate to come back to it—makes it more difficult for the money that goes in at the top to get to where it is needed on the ground. If I were a Health Minister, I would be completely frustrated by the fact that I was pushing a lever that was not connected to anything. Clinical commissioning groups and others are taking money that should be going to mental health and diverting it towards other priorities, which I accept they see as important.

I finish by again congratulating the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow and everyone who has spoken. The debate has allowed us to shine a spotlight on mental health again—that is a good thing—on autism, which is not widely understood in the broader community, and on the particular challenges faced by those on the autism spectrum who suffer from mental illness.

4.27 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I add my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron). I think I am the first person to pronounce the name of her constituency correctly. I am pleased once again to participate in a debate about autism, a condition that, as we all know, for too many years has not been sufficiently recognised or its challenges fully appreciated. That is starting to change, which is good news for all who are living with autism and who have been either not recognised or misunderstood for too long.

Autism is not a mental health condition, but autistic people are more likely to develop mental health problems such as anxiety disorders, OCD and depression. That is for a host of reasons, such as not being supported and experiencing social isolation. Research shows that a diagnosis of autism can lead to an increased risk of mental health conditions.

Support for those living with autism is very important, as has been widely recognised in the Chamber this afternoon. Anxiety disorders are very common among those on the autism spectrum. Roughly 40% have symptoms of at least one anxiety disorder at any one time, compared with around 15% of people in the general population, and such disorders in themselves can lead to depression.

It is very worrying that young people living with autism are 28 times more likely to consider suicide than other young people are, and it also affects adults who have not been diagnosed. There is no doubt that people with the condition have an increased risk of suicide, as my hon. Friend has pointed out. That could well be because 66% of autistic people and 67% of their families have reported feeling socially isolated.

Mrs Moon: Does the hon. Lady recognise that another major problem for families of autistic children is that should one of their children take their own life, the

[Mrs Moon]

postvention support—the after-suicide support—is not there either, so the social isolation that they experienced in life continues after death and complicates families' grief? That area must also be tackled.

Patricia Gibson: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady's excellent point. Should such a tragedy occur and a suicide take place, it is important that the family is supported through that as much as possible.

Some 70% of autistic people are reported to have mental health disorders, such as anxiety or depression. As we have heard, suicide is one of the leading causes of death in the autism community, and that alone tells us that this issue demands our attention. As the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) pointed out, diagnosis is important because it should be the foundation on which effective support for autistic individuals and their families is built. Similarly, a delay in diagnosis can hinder effective support and prevent intervention strategies from being put in place.

The National Autistic Society Scotland reported in 2013 that 61% of those it had surveyed said they felt relieved when they received a diagnosis, because such a diagnosis can end years of feeling misunderstood and isolated. We have talked a lot about this as a UK issue, but as a Scottish MP, I want to mention the Scottish Government's strategy for autism. The strategy, which is based on research, is working to improve waiting times for diagnosis and assessment to create consistent service standards across Scotland, and is providing training opportunities. The entire autism spectrum needs to be addressed, as well as the whole lifespan of people living with autism in Scotland. This is the logic behind this autism strategy, so it is a very positive step.

We have heard about initiatives such as autism hours in supermarkets and special autism-friendly cinematic screenings, and these are all very important and positive steps. There is a greater awareness and understanding of autism in this country but, as we have recognised today, we still have a long way to go. I will end by saying that we often think of those with autism as finding it difficult to see the world as we see it, but the truth is that we need to see the world as they see it, because if we do so we may then be able to start to make real progress.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I call David Linden.

4.32 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. On St Andrew's day, may I say what a pleasure it is to serve under the chairmanship of a daughter of Elderslie?

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) for securing this debate, and it is a real pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), although I am beginning to be a bit disappointed that I do not have three communities in my constituency name. I welcome the opportunity to take part in this debate, and to sum up on behalf of the Scottish National party.

Today's debate is on a very serious and important issue. It is important to address it for a multitude of reasons, but primarily because of the prevalence of

poor mental health in those living with autism. About one in four people across the UK has a mental health problem, but the figure for autistic people is almost four out of every five. As the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) mentioned, the autism research charity Autistica reports that up to two thirds of autistic adults have thought about committing suicide and, quite shockingly—this figure is utterly concerning—35% have attempted suicide. Although only about 1% of people in the UK are autistic, up to 15% of the people hospitalised after attempting suicide have a diagnosis of autism. These are very sobering statistics, which is why it is crucial that this issue is out in the open, and I am very glad that we have managed to bring this debate to the Floor of the House today.

Despite all this information, there is not much research to indicate why such a disparity exists, and I will come back to that point in a moment. That is why the research projects commissioned by Autistica—the ongoing work with the University of Nottingham on understanding suicide and autism—are to be commended. While we await the findings of this research, we must continue to do all we can.

Given that people with autism are more likely to be diagnosed with a mental health condition, early diagnosis and support are vital. Delays in diagnosis can hinder the implementation of effective support and intervention strategies. Members from other nations in the UK will no doubt know—indeed, they have highlighted this—where such delays are, but I would like to say a few words from a Scottish perspective. I will not, however, repeat what my hon. Friends the Members for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow and for North Ayrshire and Arran have said, for reasons of time.

The Scottish Government acknowledge that there is more we can do to improve waiting times, which is part of the strategy that was outlined by my hon. Friend for North Ayrshire and Arran. Surveys have shown that a positive diagnostic experience is associated with lower levels of stress and more effective coping strategies. Shorter waiting times for diagnosis can not only cut down on the time during which autistic people may feel misunderstood and isolated, but allow proper support to be given, which is very important. In addition to working towards faster diagnosis, the Scottish Government are investing record sums in mental health. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) is no longer in her place, but I know that she has an interest in this. I commend what she has done in mental health. This financial year, investment in mental health for NHS Scotland will exceed £1 billion for the first time. This represents a huge increase on the £650 million spent in 2006-07, and it underlines the greater seriousness with which mental health in general is now being treated. I welcome that.

I am the son-in-law of someone who has recently retired from a medical practice in Stornoway. My mother-in-law would often say that about half the people who came through the door had mental health issues, but that was not necessarily how the funding had been distributed in recent years.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I praise the SNP Government for their autism strategy. I can see the benefit of it in my constituency. The only slight point I would make is the tiniest wee niggle. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the good

work that the Scottish Government have done could perhaps be more widely advertised? There is still a slight gap between the Scottish general public's understanding of it and the work that has been done. Perhaps via advertising or some sort of media campaign, it would be good to flag that.

David Linden: I am more than happy to agree with the hon. Gentleman on that. He brings considerable experience to the House; he is a former Member of the Scottish Parliament.

The additional funding for 800 additional mental health workers in key settings such as accident and emergency departments, GP surgeries, custody suites and prisons will reach £35 million by 2022. This local provision is crucial in ensuring that those with mental health problems get the help that they need when they need it. There is still much more to do, but we are moving in the right direction and clearly taking these matters seriously.

All these figures and actions might seem like hot air, but there is an understanding in this place that they can make the difference between life and death for some people. It is crucial that we get this right and learn from past mistakes if we are to prevent what are in essence preventable deaths.

It is clear from the shocking statistic that I gave earlier—that 35% of autistic people have attempted suicide—that much more can be done. There is a big challenge here and if we cannot collectively take responsibility and see that percentage fall, we will fail all those who live with autism.

I am conscious of the time and I want to make sure that my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow has a significant amount of time to wind up, but before I conclude I pay tribute to a few of the organisations that do fantastic work in Scotland such as the Autism Network Scotland and the National Autistic Society for Scotland. At this juncture I commend Bob MacBean of the National Autistic Society, a former Labour councillor in my constituency. Scottish Autism continues to do fantastic work, not least in conferences and children's mental health. At a much more local level, in my constituency of Glasgow East, local families engaged with PACT for Autism came to visit me at one of my recent surgeries at Parkhead library. PACT is a friendly, parent carer-led support group that provides support, information and advice to all with a focus on autism spectrum disorders. I am sure that all hon. Members will have these kinds of groups in their constituencies. They provide wonderful support at a very local level, and the impact cannot be underestimated. There is a point to be made about the funding for such groups, which is probably a subject for another day.

Something as simple as one of PACT's regular coffee mornings can be a lifeline for individuals and families in the east end of Glasgow. I commend that and I hope that the House will join me in recognising their work. We realise that such groups do an awful lot to help autistic people and their families to lead happy, healthy lives every single day.

I commend my hon. Friend, but we need to resolve in this place to do everything to ensure that people on the autistic spectrum can lead healthy, happy lives. I wish everyone a happy St Andrew's day.

4.39 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) and others on securing this important debate and on her excellent opening speech. I thank Autistica, the National Autistic Society and Ambitious about Autism for the important work that they do and the support that they provide for people living with autism.

This is our second debate on autism since our return from the summer recess and it is good that it has been so constructive. I also thank all other hon. Members here for their excellent and passionate speeches. The hon. Members for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), and my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and for North Durham (Mr Jones), all spoke movingly, often from personal family experience or about constituents. This debate may have been short, but it has none the less been very powerful.

It is important to say that autism is not a mental health condition: it is possible to have both autism and good mental health, but that is not always the case, as we have heard. Between 70% and 80% of autistic people develop mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, and four out of 10 children with autism have at least two mental health problems.

Adults with autism who do not have a learning disability are nine times more likely to die by suicide than the general population; those with a learning disability are still twice as likely to take their own lives. Clearly, more needs to be done to support the mental health needs of people living with autism. Reducing the health inequalities experienced by people living with autism is a priority for the NHS mandate for 2017-18, and that is welcome. Mental ill health is a major contributory factor to health inequality for people with autism. Ensuring access to appropriate mental health care is important in the fight to tackle these disparities.

However, there are too often significant barriers to accessing the right treatment. In a debate in September, we talked about waiting times for autism diagnosis—it is a scandal that those can be as long as 125 weeks. Accessing a diagnosis is the first step towards securing the support that people living with autism need, and that is also true for mental health support. We are pleased that data on autism diagnosis waiting times is going to be collected and published from April 2018; hopefully, it will help to drive an improvement in this area.

Today, I want to focus on how mental health services can be improved for people living with autism. Last week, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) told the Health Committee about T, a young boy with autism. As we heard from the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow, T was rejected four times for treatment by child and adolescent mental health services, despite reporting suicidal thoughts and having a family history of suicide. He was rejected because he had not yet attempted to take his own life.

The Children's Commissioner for England confirmed concerns about the issue when she stated to the Health Committee that this type of situation was now "the norm" within children's mental health services. That is worrying

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

generally for children's wellbeing, but for those living with autism it is particularly so, for a number of reasons. Experiences of suicide are different in the autism community from those in the wider population; relying on certain behaviours and expectations of what someone in need of support will look like can be dangerous.

As the Children's Commissioner put it, children with mental health problems will become adults with mental health problems very soon. We cannot continue to miss opportunities to intervene early. That means, sadly, that T's experience is just one of many. The five year forward view for mental health recommended that NHS England develop autism-specific mental health care pathways, but there is currently no information on the timetable, the scope of the pathway or who will be leading the issue. The pathway should cover children, young people and adults on the autism spectrum. It should take into account the fact that mental health conditions can present themselves in different ways for people with autism and it should recognise that mental health treatment may need to be tailored for people with autism. I hope the Minister will reflect on that in her response. Will she tell the House when and how the pathways will be developed?

Early intervention and prevention should form the basis of our mental health services. However, too often specific issues make it difficult for people with autism to access that early support that is so vital. The first point of call for many people experiencing mental health problems is their GP; for many people with autism that can be difficult, as GP surgeries are often not autism-friendly. This is how one autistic adult described their experience:

"When anxiety is really bad I start to feel a panic attack at the prospect of just having to step out of my front door. So having to go to the GP is like having to climb Everest."

It is important that GPs understand that every autistic person is different, and that each person may need some adjustments to be made before he or she can feel comfortable about attending the local GP's surgery. For example, some autistic people may be hypersensitive to sound and light and may therefore need an appointment at a quieter time of day, while others may be hyposensitive and benefit from a more stimulating environment. GPs may also need to tailor the way in which they communicate with patients—for instance, using clear language, or finding ways of communicating with somebody who does not speak. To do that, GPs must be able to access detailed and accurate records about their patients' needs. Currently GPs often do not record much information about their autistic patients, and may not even record that a person is autistic at all.

In August, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommended that GPs keep a set of local autism registers similar to those kept for people with learning disabilities, asthma and diabetes. Will the Minister tell us when she expects the NICE recommendations on autism GP registers to be adopted, and whether NHS England will work to ensure that the data gathered is used to inform better commissioning of autism and mental health services?

We have heard powerful accounts today from Members on both sides of the House about what happens when we get mental health treatment wrong. It is all too easy

for people with autism to receive inappropriate mental health treatment, or to be blocked altogether from access to treatment. As the Government review the Mental Health Act 1983, it is important that they consider everything that has been raised in today's debate and ensure that autistic people are supported. The shocking suicide statistics and testimonies from Members today show starkly how crucial it is that more is done on the issue, and the power is in the Minister's hands. I hope that she has listened and will act.

4.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): I have greatly enjoyed listening to the debate, because I have heard so much good common sense and so much passion and care expressed about this important issue. It has been a pleasure. I am glad that we reached it in the end, although it was slightly truncated.

I congratulate the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) on securing the debate, and I congratulate all the other Members who have participated in it. Everyone was absolutely right to say that we need to understand more about mental health, autism and suicide, and to understand more about what constitutes appropriate mental health treatment and treatment for people with autism. The existence of the suicide statistics, unpleasant as they are, demonstrates that we really must do better in this regard.

As I have said, I enjoyed all the speeches today, but I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow for the expertise and the personal passion that characterised her arguments. She has given me a lot to think about, but let me reaffirm to her that my door is always open so that I can hear more. I particularly want to hear what the strategy in Scotland has delivered, because she is absolutely right: when we see good practice, we should all share it and ensure that it becomes the norm for everyone.

We can never debate autism without considering the issue of waiting times, and, as Members have pointed out, in some areas they are very poor indeed. As we have confirmed, we will be publishing more data from April which will provide us with the tools with which to "give challenge". However, it is clear that waiting times are not good enough, especially in the north-east, and we are failing people when we do not give them an early diagnosis.

The hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) mentioned the criminal justice system, which is where people with autism and mental health issues often end up. As he said, we need to improve the sensitivity with which the criminal justice agencies deal with such conditions. I can tell him that the Ministry of Justice is working with the Home Office and the Crown Prosecution Service to develop new guidelines to help officers to support people. I think I need to do more with the MOJ to ensure that we do not put people in a setting that will damage them further, but I am pleased that there are now liaison and diversion services covering 80% of the country to achieve exactly that.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow also described very well, as did the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), how for some people with autism

accessing support from GPs can cause distress in itself. This is where debates such as this can be so useful, because sometimes the most simple, practical things can make the biggest impact. It surely cannot be beyond the wit of any of us to make sure that GPs receive appropriate advice about things like lighting, and even having a quiet area. We often now have multi-service GP and health centres, and there must be space in them to have a quiet area.

Mrs Moon: One of the risks is that, rather than going to their GP, people will look on the internet, where, sadly, they will find far too much information about how to take their own life and what methods to use. Also, if they go into chatrooms to share, they find encouragement to take their own life. This is an area that we must tackle.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention and the work she does in this area; I know she cares about it a great deal. She is absolutely right that there is a serious vulnerability among people who feel uncomfortable about accessing medical care. We must consider the proximity of the internet where it is possible to buy drugs and where nobody really understands what they are buying. We can do a lot more to enable people to protect themselves. The internet is a great source of information, but it can be less than benign when people want to use it for these purposes.

I have limited time and know I will not be able to do justice to all the contributions to the debate, but I will do my best. If I do not cover them all, it is not because I have ignored any of the points raised; rather, it is because there were too many good speeches to address in a short space of time.

The hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) made some extremely good points. She rightly highlighted the issue of unemployment, and I, too, am particularly concerned about that. We have just published the work and health strategy, and this is an area where we need to do better. The reality is that there is a great skillset here for particular disciplines, and enlightened employers recognise that. We can do a lot more to spread good practice here, as with GP surgeries, such as about what would be sympathetic interview styles for people with autism, so that we can enable them to become integrated. The hon. Lady is right that work is probably the best tool with which to protect our mental health, and we will look at that.

I was also intrigued by the hon. Lady's autism surgeries, and wonder whether she might consider making that a toolkit that all of us with an interest in the issue could roll out in our own surgeries. Again, a lot of this is about raising awareness of the challenges people with autism face. We are in the public eye and have the ability to do that, so I ask the hon. Lady to tell me how she organised those surgeries.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) rightly mentioned schools. There is a problem with provision, and whether we always get it right—whether it should be mainstream or alternative provision, and whether we have enough places for alternative provision if that is the appropriate setting. That is particularly challenging in my local area, but it is not fair to fail individuals by excluding them because maintaining them in mainstream schools is either challenging or not appropriate for them. The state needs to ensure they get appropriate schooling.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) spoke at length about her own experience and set me a number of challenges. I will be happy to report to her on them. I can also give her every guarantee that the data she asked for will be made public next year.

I shall now turn to some of the things we are doing to develop the autism pathway and autism strategy. We have set an expectation in the NHS mandate that the NHS will reduce the health gap between people with mental health problems, learning disabilities and autism and the population as a whole, and support them to live full, healthy and independent lives. We acknowledge, however, that the complexity of autism and the multifaceted nature of the needs of those on the spectrum poses particular challenges to professionals and commissioners. I am keen that mental health should be considered by the new task and finish groups that are being established to implement the autism strategy, and I will ensure that progress is made in implementing the strategy in line with the Autism Act 2009.

It is important that the NHS accommodates the requirements of vulnerable groups such as autistic people through staff training, awareness raising and reasonable adjustments to services, as we have heard. Autistic people should be able to access mental health services like everyone else if they are supported to engage with services and helped to explain their problems so that they can receive treatment. They should not fall between two stools—between autism or learning disabilities services on the one hand and mental health services on the other. We need to ensure that we are giving bespoke treatment and care to people with both issues.

A lot of the treatments that we are developing in mental health will not be suitable for people with autism. We are therefore looking at what we can do to alter the psychological therapies that are available to make them more user-friendly and sympathetic to people with autism. I was horrified to hear what was said about group therapy. I am a lay person, but it is pretty obvious to me that group therapy is not appropriate for people with autism. Clearly, the fact that that is happening is an indication of how much more we have to do to ensure that society is more sensitive to the needs of those people.

I am running out of time, and I really want to hear from the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow, but I just want to emphasise that research will play an important role. We are looking at many projects at the moment. There is a research theme on neurodevelopmental disorders, and a project at Avon and Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust looking into guided self-help for depression in adults with autism, as well as work at Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust. In the East of England, a project is being led by Professor Simon Baron Cohen focusing on suicide, autism and autistic traits, which will obviously be of interest to everyone who has participated in the debate today. I am grateful, too, for the research undertaken by Autistica, which has really highlighted this issue and brought us to where we are today. I am pleased to say that Autistica has met the national suicide prevention strategy advisory group, which advises the Government on the national suicide prevention strategy, to talk about its research. We will be reflecting on the advice that it has given us.

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

I thank everyone once again for participating in the debate. As I have said, I am always interested to hear about good practice and what more we can do. Rest assured, we still need to do much more to support people with autism, and particularly to ensure that they can access appropriate mental health services.

4.57 pm

Dr Cameron: This has been a wonderful debate. It has been truly cross-party and collegiate, and we must work together to improve the lives of people across the autistic spectrum and the services that we provide for them. This is about lifespan, so it involves a number of services for all aspects of the lifespan. It is also about streamlining the transfer from child to adult services. This is a multi-departmental matter, and I urge the Minister to speak to other Departments to ensure that the autism strategy is embedded in all their policies. As has been said, we need more early diagnosis, awareness and support in schools, and treatments that can be adapted. There is also vital research to be done, and we could be world leaders in that regard. That is a key aspiration that we should endeavour to meet. People with autism need support from school to the workplace, and carers and families also need support. We also desperately need to provide crisis services. Parliament must be inclusive, and I am keen to hear more about what we can do as individual MPs, both in our surgeries and through Parliament, to take these issues forward. We need to make our surgeries autism-friendly places, to ensure that we are role models in service development.

The Minister has many issues to take forward, and I am thankful for her response. I am glad that her door is open, because I might be coming through it on numerous occasions. I am also keen to visit the projects that she has described, which are going to pave the way for progress. It is vital that we take this forward and save lives. Let us work together and do this right across the United Kingdom. Finally, I would like to wish everyone a happy St Andrew's day.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Happy St Andrew's day.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the support available for autistic people experiencing mental health problems; calls on the Government to ensure that the NICE-recommended indicator for autism in GP registers is included in the Quality and Outcomes Framework; and further calls on the Government to ensure NHS England works closely with the autism community to develop effective and research-based mental health pathways.

4.59 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to raise with you a conversation that I have had in the past few minutes, in which I have been informed that Royal Bank of Scotland is going to close three branches in my constituency, at Kyle of Lochalsh, Beaully and Mallaig. I am asking for your assistance, Madam Deputy Speaker. What do I need to do in order to ask one of the Treasury Ministers to come to the House to discuss this important matter? We understand that Royal Bank of Scotland is operationally independent, but none the less, we as the state are the majority owners of the bank. The bank in Kyle is one hour's travelling distance to the nearest Royal Bank of Scotland branch in Portree. The one in Mallaig is an hour's distance to Fort William. Those banks have thousands of customers. The branch in Beaully is the last remaining bank in that village. We need to have an urgent debate in the House about the responsibility that banks such as Royal Bank of Scotland have to their communities.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point, but he knows that it is not a point of order for the Chair and I cannot give an answer on the substantive issue that he has raised. He seeks my advice, however, on how to bring a Minister to the Dispatch Box, and I can advise him that there are various methods that he can use to do that. He might like to consult the Table Office on the best way forward. I am sure that he will also consider other ways, such as approaching the Backbench Business Committee in order to arrange a debate, if he is so inclined. If he is certain that this is a matter that ought to be discussed on the Floor of the House, I am sure that his ingenuity will ensure that that happens.

Leaving the EU: Student Exchanges

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

5.1 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the subject of foreign exchanges in the Chamber this evening. In my own family, exchanges are an integral part of growing up. I was packed off to Holland at 10 years old, and to a family in France at 11. As my linguistic skills improved, Germany and Hong Kong followed. During my undergraduate studies, I was lucky enough to go on an Erasmus programme at Caen University.

The pattern repeats itself, as in so much of what we do as parents: at home we rarely have a holiday without a foreign exchange student. In the past few years we have welcomed Anne-France and Philippine from Paris; Anya from Moscow; Yining Le from Beijing; Julius and Johanna from Dusseldorf, whose mother was an old friend of mine from university; Eleanor from Loches; and we are just starting to get to know a girl from southern Italy. With two linguist daughters, a great deal of our family time is spent applying for visas for my girls, and entertaining and providing regular meals for visiting teenagers. The experience is not simply about improving the ability to communicate in a different language; the children come back confident and buzzing with new experiences, as well as with a desire to learn better language skills. We have all learnt from Anya and Yining Le, who taught us so much about their different cultures and traditions. We really value the wider network of family and friends we have made as a result of getting to know them.

The same was true for year 6 pupils at Hook Norton Primary School, whom I was proud to see win a British Council international school award earlier this week. Their teacher told me about 18 years of exchanges with Sweden and how much the children gain from it. Bure Park Primary School, which I also visited this week, exchanges annually with Italian and German children. I want such opportunities to be available to all our young people.

We must give greater consideration to language learning. The Government have been laudably keen to promote STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering and maths—and are making efforts to ensure that modern foreign languages are part of the EBacc. Nevertheless, language learning is on a downward spiral. The number of GCSEs taken in modern languages fell by more than 7% this year, and this summer's A-level results show that the number of British students taking languages has almost halved over the past two decades. Applications to study a European language at university have fallen by 20% over the past four years. Those figures show why we do not have enough new teachers leaving our universities to encourage language learning in children at school today and tomorrow.

Earlier this week the Foreign Secretary spoke of his vision for a global Britain:

“The driving purpose of this Government is to strengthen Britain's global role, to raise our level of national ambition and to prepare for the opportunities before us”.—[*Official Report*, 27 November 2017; Vol. 632, c. 54.]

How can foreign exchanges help? The international language of business might be English, but the language of selling goes so much deeper. Soft diplomacy involves much more than just talking. We are fortunate that English is widely spoken, but our success in achieving a truly global Britain depends on our ability not only to speak to people abroad but to understand their culture—shouting loudly will not sell our products worldwide.

The recent “Languages for the Future” report by the brilliant British Council makes it clear:

“Without language skills we lose out not only through the restricted ability to communicate internationally, but even more importantly through the closing down of opportunities for overseas work experience, a lack of international business sense, a failure to appreciate that other cultures have different ways of doing things and a potential tendency to overestimate the global importance of British culture.”

Young people who have spent time immersed in the domestic life of another country are so much better equipped for selling global Britain, global justice and our values and opportunities.

Another great advantage of student exchanges is that they are a comparatively cheap way to travel. The cost is that of the fare and, where appropriate, the visa. It is important that the Government think seriously about how they deal with young people on exchanges, because when my daughter visits her Russian exchange, she has to fill out a new visa application each time and come up to London to have her biometrics taken. We put up barriers on both sides, because her 17-year-old Russian exchange was charged almost £500 for her UK visa application, which had to be expedited as her initial application was refused—all this to allow her to come on our family holiday to Wales. Although I realise this goes beyond the Minister's remit, I hope he will work with his colleagues in the Home Office to ensure that teenagers such as those two, as well as the young people who take part in programmes such as Erasmus, are encouraged in their exchanging, particularly after we leave the EU.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. Another dimension, as I am sure she knows, is that schools often go on visits abroad—not necessarily exchanges—and again there can be obstacles. Does she agree that schools sometimes find it difficult to recruit language teachers?

Victoria Prentis: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The type of foreign language exchanges I am talking about involve living with a family abroad and the depth of understanding that can be gained only in a domestic setting. That is what I am so keen to promote. Of course it is difficult for schools to arrange such exchanges, but it is worth it.

I thank all teachers who put themselves out and often spend their own holidays travelling with groups of teenagers—not everybody's cup of tea—to far-flung places to enable deep, worthwhile experiences for our children. I hope the Minister will join me in encouraging that.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): This is a classic example of a debate in which I made to leave Chamber, realised what the debate was about and came back with alacrity. I am hugely enjoying the hon. Lady's contribution, and I am in total agreement

[Jamie Stone]

with her. Friendships formed between foreign students can be crucial. President Clinton was a Rhodes scholar at Oxford, which helped his understanding and attitude towards this country.

Victoria Prentis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It is about a depth of friendship that encourages not only language skills but the ability to have a network of friends and contacts. My early experiences of foreign exchanges gave me the confidence to travel abroad in the political sphere. I was able to spend some time working for the Christian Democratic Union of Germany and at the White House in the States, but I doubt that I would ever have thought of such opportunities had I not had my early experiences of travel and of the value of building networks across continents, which early foreign exchange travel offers to students. I cannot tell him how valuable I think such experiences are.

Exchanges can give our young people the internationalist outlook that we need. We should capitalise on the teenage ability to make friends easily and encourage teenagers to open their eyes to new and different opportunities. Even though learning a language inevitably involves hard work on grammar and vocab tests, the speed with which one picks up a language when immersed in family life is second to none. Learning with a friend is so much better, and the technology available to students makes learning easily accessible. My children have Mandarin and Russian keyboards on their phones to enable them to text their exchanges—that does make policing their phones rather difficult when their mother does not speak either language. Nevertheless, I commend their enthusiasm, and it seems to be the way that the children of today find easiest to communicate. I am impressed that one of my daughters does her texting in Russian and the Russian exchange does hers in English, which is really commendable—and not just done to frustrate mothers.

Finally, language learning has lifelong health benefits. Studies of people with Alzheimer's disease have shown that, on average, symptoms started four and half years later for people who could speak at least two languages. It is perhaps appropriate to mention my grandmother here. She is well into her 90s, but continues to work on her languages through audiobooks now that her eyesight is not as good as it once was. She successfully taught generations of children of all abilities to communicate in a selection of languages—albeit all with a strong Welsh accent. I ask the Minister to join me in thanking her and today's generation of language teachers, including the inspirational women who teach my daughters. I ask him to encourage them to promote the student exchanges that we need to take global Britain forward.

5.12 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) on securing this debate. I join her in thanking the language teachers up and down the country who teach our young people to speak, write and read in a foreign language. As I will mention later, I was at school this morning with a commendable group of language teachers, who do wonderful work in that school.

This debate gives me the opportunity to emphasise again the Government's commitment to remaining open to the world after we leave the EU and to becoming

even more global and internationalist in our outlook. Improving the take-up and teaching of modern foreign languages in our schools and ensuring that there continues to be international opportunities for students, young people and teachers to participate in exchanges is an important part of achieving that goal. I also agree with my hon. Friend that there are business, cultural and educational benefits to learning a language

The level of take-up and proficiency in foreign languages in England is not yet what it should be—my hon. Friend was right to point that out—and we have taken steps to address that. In 2010, we introduced the English baccalaureate. To meet this measure of performance for state-funded secondary schools, pupils have to be entered for GCSEs in English, maths, science, history or geography and an ancient or modern foreign language. In July, we announced our ambition for 75% of year 10 pupils to be taking the EBacc by 2022 and for that to reach 90% by 2025. It was 37% this year. That represents a significant step-change for schools, particularly in relation to the uptake of languages GCSEs, which is often the area that has prevented schools from achieving higher EBacc entry rates. Our expectation is that the uptake of these GCSEs will increase over the coming years, widening the potential pool of students with the ability to continue studying languages to a higher level.

In September 2014, schools began to teach the new national curriculum that we introduced. It requires local authority-maintained primary schools to teach a modern or ancient foreign language to pupils at key stage 2. Schools can choose which language to teach, and must ensure that pupils make substantial progress in one language by the end of primary school. It is also mandatory for maintained secondary schools to teach a foreign language to pupils at key stage 3. Although there is no requirement for every pupil in such schools to then take a language at GCSE, there is a statutory entitlement for every pupil to take a course leading to a recognised qualification, if they wish to do so.

The fact that pupils often have the choice of whether to continue to study a language to GCSE makes it especially important for their earlier experiences of being taught the subject to be positive.

Mr Jim Cunningham: The Minister may or may not be able to answer this question. How popular is Chinese—how interested are people in this country in taking up the language? The Chinese have lots of markets and we should not forget that we trade with China.

Nick Gibb: If the hon. Gentleman is patient, I shall come to that. One of the purposes of my visit this morning was to see the Mandarin excellence programme that is happening in a number of schools throughout the country.

In a 2015 report, “Key stage 3: the wasted years?”, Ofsted reported that many pupils chose to discontinue studying languages at the end of key stage 3 because of a lack of enjoyment in their lessons or a feeling of not making enough progress. That was despite many of the same pupils recognising the value of languages. Prompted by that, the Teaching Schools Council carried out a review of modern foreign languages pedagogy in key stages 3 and 4. The review was carried out by the experienced headteacher Ian Bauckham and reported in November last year. It set out key principles for

delivering effective language teaching and produced a number of sensible recommendations for teachers and headteachers in schools.

We have improved the standard and quality of qualifications. We worked with Ofqual, subject experts, universities and teachers to design new GCSEs and A-levels, which were introduced for French, German and Spanish in 2016. The level of demand of these qualifications matches those of the highest-performing countries, and they will better prepare pupils for the demands of further education and employment. They are robust qualifications in which students, employers, colleges and universities can have confidence. French, German and Spanish remain the top three most popular foreign languages taught in our schools, although Mandarin is coming up fast. As the British Council “Languages for the Future” report highlights, Mandarin is one of the top five languages of crucial importance for the UK’s future prosperity, security and influence in the world.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury and the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) might be interested to know that the Department has established and funded the Mandarin excellence programme since 2016. The programme offers intense study in the language, which is not only personally enriching for students but will give them a significant advantage when they enter the world of work. We want 5,000 young people, *ab initio*, to study the language and become fluent by 2020.

Pupils on the programme study Mandarin—listen to this—for eight hours a week, at least four hours of which are teacher-led in classrooms, with the remaining four hours in their own time. Over the next four years, I hope that we will see a significant increase in the numbers of pupils on the programme. The programme started with 14 secondary schools in September 2016, and 23 additional secondary schools joined in September this year.

I was delighted earlier today to see the programme in action and meet some of the pupils during my visit to Alexandra Park School in Haringey. At Alexandra Park, 27 pupils started in the year 7 cohort in September last year. They scored a very impressive 95% average mark in progress tests across reading, writing, listening and speaking last summer, and they have all progressed to the second year of the programme. A new year 7 cohort of 30 pupils started Mandarin lessons at Alexandra Park in September 2017, and I am sure they will do equally well. Incidentally, all year 7 pupils at that school study Mandarin and a European language.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Once again, I am not sure whether the Minister can answer this question now. Perhaps he can write to me on it. Are any schools in Coventry teaching Mandarin?

Nick Gibb: I will have to write to the hon. Gentleman about that. We want to have a spread of Mandarin excellence programmes across the country, but the initial schools were chosen because they already had a track record of teaching Mandarin very well. The project is led and driven by the excellent Katharine Carruthers of the UCL Institute of Education. The pupils I met this morning were hugely impressive, very ambitious and had high expectations. They want not only to take a GCSE and an A-level in Mandarin, but to go on to HSK 4 and HSK 5, which is essentially fluency in the

language. Interestingly, I asked them all what they wanted to do when they left school and none of them wanted to go on to study Mandarin at university. They wanted to be lawyers, doctors and business people, but they also wanted to be fluent in Mandarin.

Jamie Stone: The answer to my question may be, “Write a letter to John Swinney in the Scottish Government” but does the Minister have any idea what the situation is with regard to the teaching of Mandarin across the border in Scotland?

Nick Gibb: No, I am afraid that I do not. This is a devolved matter. I have spoken to John Swinney a number of times about education matters, and the Scottish Government are implementing a new curriculum for excellence.

The programme also supports the training of new Mandarin teachers to ensure that there is capacity within the system to teach Mandarin. The quality and supply of teachers of modern foreign languages are essential to pupil proficiency and progression. It is very important that pupils are taught by high-quality and inspiring teachers—like the ones I met this morning—in all the subjects, including languages. We remain committed to attracting the brightest and best graduates into the teaching profession. To support that commitment, we continue to offer generous tax-free bursaries, worth up to £26,000, and tax-free scholarships of up to £28,000 for trainees in modern foreign languages.

Figures released today show that we recruited 1,405 modern foreign language trainees to start initial teacher training courses this year, achieving 93% of our target, which was similar to our performance last year, where we achieved 94% of our target.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I appreciate the Minister giving way on this important subject. Is he aware of the ScotGrad programme in Scotland, which is run by Scottish Enterprise? It sponsors up to 40% of the gross salary of an undergraduate for a year so they may undertake a placement in industry on the subject of business development. Let me cite a good example. When I worked with Scottish Enterprise, I sponsored a foreign language student, a Mandarin student, who worked with a heavy engineering company in Scotland. As a result of that one-year placement, the company increased its turnover in the Chinese market by up to 60% in the given year. That was a huge commercial opportunity, and just shows the untapped potential of integrating foreign language skills into our industries. There could be a good opportunity to roll that out across the United Kingdom.

Nick Gibb: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. We are a global trading nation and it is essential that we are able to speak to our customers in their own language, which is why I feel as passionately as my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury and the hon. Gentleman about the importance of young people learning languages.

We recognise, however, that recruitment in modern foreign language subjects continues to be challenging, which is why we are supporting schools with targeted initiatives that go beyond our standard recruitment channels. For example, we recently announced a new student loan reimbursement programme for MFL teachers in the early years of their career. This pilot incentivises

[Nick Gibb]

new teachers to stay in the profession and to teach in the areas where they are needed most. We also acknowledge the valuable contribution that internationally trained teachers make to education in this country, which is why we want to ensure that schools have the opportunity to recruit from overseas to fill posts that cannot be filled from the resident workforce.

We are working with the Spanish Ministry of Education and have joined its visiting teachers programme, which provides opportunities for schools in England to recruit high-quality modern foreign language teachers from Spain. An acclimatisation package is provided to help to support the new teachers to work and live in England. Sixteen teachers took up post in September 2017, and we have built a recruitment pool of over 60 teachers available for recruitment this academic year. We also recognise the benefits that cultural exchange can bring. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. They build important political, diplomatic and knowledge-sharing networks around the world, not to mention the lifelong friendships that come from those exchanges.

Since 2007, the UK Government have co-funded an annual headteachers' exchange programme with the Ministry of Education in Singapore and the British Council, and I was delighted to attend the 10th anniversary of the programme at the Singapore high commission last week. This scheme provides an excellent opportunity for headteachers in England to share ideas and best practice with their counterparts in Singapore, which is the best-performing country in PISA on important areas such as improving maths teaching and the use of textbooks to support a knowledge-rich curriculum. Headteachers who have taken part in previous exchanges have reported a lasting positive impact. For example, Executive Head Marie-Claire Bretherton of Mount Street Academy, Lincoln, has now trained 60 teachers across the Kyra Teaching Schools Alliance in maths mastery following her visit to Singapore in 2016.

School links and exchanges between schools have long provided valuable cultural and language experiences for our pupils. Many of our schools have long-standing partnerships with schools overseas, and the British Council manages a number of school-linking programmes in

over 40 countries and a supportive framework for international activities in schools through its international school award. Supporting student exchanges helps us to create a new generation that is globally mobile, culturally agile and thrives in an increasingly global economy.

In higher education, we are keen to work with the sector to further explore how we can best promote outward mobility and the benefits our UK students will gain from studying abroad. Earlier this month, my hon. Friend the Universities Minister welcomed the Go International: Stand Out campaign launched by Universities UK International to encourage young people to experience studying, working and volunteering abroad. This campaign aims to double the percentage of UK students having some form of outward mobility experience as part of their degree by 2020.

I cannot talk about student exchange without mentioning the long-established Erasmus+ programme. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made it clear in her Florence speech that education was one area where she hoped the UK would continue to participate on the basis of a fair and ongoing contribution, among many other areas of business, commerce and culture.

We are not just committed to providing our young people with outward mobility opportunities. We also recognise the importance of welcoming talent from around the world into our institutions. As the Government have said before, EU and international students enrich the UK, both financially and culturally, bring greater diversity to our schools, universities and colleges, add an international dimension to the experience of our students and go on to become important ambassadors for the UK in later life.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising these important issues and for allowing me to point out how much the Government value modern foreign languages, inspirational teachers and student exchanges. I hope that she is reassured that we recognise the importance of this issue and that we are working to get the right result for the education sector in the UK.

Question put and agreed to.

5.27 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 30 November 2017

[STEVE McCABE *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Deafness and Hearing Loss

1.30 pm

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): I draw hon. Members' attention to the fact that our proceedings are being made accessible for people who are deaf or have problems with hearing, and the interpreters are using British Sign Language. If Members bear that in mind while making their contributions, that will be helpful for everyone.

1.31 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered deafness and hearing loss.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr McCabe. I am even more pleased to see that our debate is being interpreted into sign language, which I believe is a parliamentary first; we may be making history, which is great for all of us who are here to participate. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to introduce the debate, and am very pleased that so many colleagues have been able to join us to contribute to this important discussion. It is good to see the Minister in his place, even though the subject is not exactly in his brief, and I look forward to hearing the winding-up speeches from him and from the Opposition spokespersons.

I place on the record my thanks to the UK Council on Deafness, Action on Hearing Loss, the National Deaf Children's Society, Deaf Plus, the Adult Cochlear Implant Action Group and Brian Lamb, DeaflympicsGB, Access Bedford, the network Three and the House of Commons Library for their assistance in preparing for the debate. That is a long list, but given that 11 million people across the UK are living with hearing loss, it could have been much longer. The UK Council on Deafness, for example, represents 43 deafness or hearing loss organisations and has produced a collective briefing. I should also declare that I wear two hearing aids of my own and am chair of the all-party group on deafness.

There are too many issues for me to raise personally and it would be unfair not to share the time available as equitably as possible among hon. Members present, so the bulk of my speech, which I have timed at 13 and a half minutes, will focus on three key issues: Access to Work, legal recognition of British Sign Language and the implementation of the national action plan on hearing loss. First, however, I would like to put down a brief marker on several other issues that I do not have time to raise in detail.

I secured an Adjournment debate on cochlear implants in March, in which the then Minister David Mowat advised me that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence would consult on new proposals by the

end of the summer. We are still awaiting that consultation, so any information from the Minister would be very welcome.

Requests to improve paediatric audiology services across the country by accrediting them through the IQIPS—improving quality in physiological services—programme have been made for some time. I would welcome an update on any progress on voluntary accreditation or, if that has proved unsatisfactory, on whether the Government have given more thought to making it compulsory.

On Deaflympics, any information from the Minister about discussions between his Department and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on support for our deaf athletes would be very welcome.

On early years intervention, the first three and a half years are critical for the development of listening and spoken language. I would be grateful for any update from the Minister on Government thinking about ensuring that auditory-verbal is put on the patient pathway as a follow-up to the newborn hearing screening.

Finally, I have some positive news about telecommunication services: the briefing from Three shared how it provides services for its deaf or hard-of-hearing customers. I also have some good news from Deaf Plus, whose BSL advice line was shortlisted this week for a national Helplines Partnership award. Well done!

Let me return to my three key issues, beginning with Access to Work. One person in six in the UK—or approximately 11 million people—is living with some form of hearing loss, and estimates show that nearly 90,000 use British Sign Language as their first language. The Government's Access to Work scheme provides grants to disabled people to enable them to have equal participation in the workforce. It has revolutionised the career opportunities of deaf people, shattering the glass ceiling that had limited them to manual jobs. It has been largely due to Access to Work that deaf people have progressed as far as their talent allows: there are now deaf chief executive officers, deaf Ministry of Justice intermediaries and deaf theatre directors, among other senior professionals.

In March 2015, however, the then Minister for Disabled People, the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), announced that the Government would impose a cap. The cap means that the scheme no longer properly supports those deaf and disabled people for whom support costs are more expensive. For deaf people who are self-employed or entrepreneurs, there is no employer to make up the difference between the award and the need. In a recent written answer, the Department for Work and Pensions indicated that it was unable to state the number of people still in receipt of awards above the cap.

The UK Council on Deafness conducted its own survey to establish the impact of the cap on deaf people. It received 87 responses, including 60 from those who will be capped in April 2018—a high response rate, given that fewer than 200 people were identified in the equality assessment as potentially in that situation. Deaf people tell us that they are already avoiding applying for work in professional, managerial and senior roles that will be capped. The cap on Access to Work awards risks imposing a glass ceiling for deaf and disabled people in their work. Some 46% said that they would not apply for promotions, 20% said they had not applied

[*Jim Fitzpatrick*]

because they were worried, and 44% said that they would stay with their current employer for as long as possible because they were worried about a new employer.

Will the Government look again at the evidence opposing the cap on Access to Work awards? Do the Government accept that the cap on Access to Work grants is set too low? The Secretary of State amended it from £42,100 to £43,000 in his statement today, but that is still too low. If the Government will not remove the cap, will they consider raising it to a level that provides deaf people with more of the support they need? Finally, have the Government considered that they may inadvertently have created legitimate financial grounds on which employers can discriminate against job applicants who use BSL? I recognise that those are questions mainly for the DWP, but if the Minister cannot respond to them today, I would be grateful if he ensured they were passed on to the appropriate quarter. In answer to my question in the Chamber about an hour ago, the Secretary of State said that the Government were still looking at evidence. I hope that means that the door is still open, because increasing the threshold by £1,000 clearly does not cut it.

In general employment terms, there are hurdles to getting into work for people with hearing loss anyway. In a YouGov survey commissioned by Action on Hearing Loss, 35% of business leaders stated that they did not feel confident about their business employing a person with hearing loss, while 57% agreed that there is a lack of available support or advice for employers about employing people with hearing loss. Access to Work is still the DWP's best-kept secret: 63% of the business leaders polled had never heard of it.

Let me move on to British Sign Language. BSL is the first or preferred language of more than 80,000 deaf people in the UK, and more than 150,000 people use it at home. In 1987, the British Deaf Association launched a call for the legal recognition of BSL, and in 2003, following extensive lobbying, BSL was officially recognised as a language in its own right by the DWP.

In 2009, the UK Government ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which states that Governments must uphold rights by

“Accepting and facilitating the use of sign languages...in official interactions”

and by

“Recognizing and promoting the use of sign languages.”

Despite formal recognition by the UK Government that BSL is a language in its own right, there has been no further progress towards establishing a legal status for BSL.

In the devolved Administrations, the situation is different. In 2012, a consultation for a British Sign Language Act in Scotland was initiated, culminating in the passing of the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015. In 2017, the Scottish Government published their first BSL national plan. In 2016, a sign language framework consultation was launched in Northern Ireland. Despite those developments, however, there is still no pathway in place for legal recognition of BSL across the UK. With such legal recognition of BSL would come the rights of deaf people, and the benefits for deaf people and for wider society would be far-reaching.

On education, deaf children are 42% less likely to achieve five or more GCSEs at grade C or above than their hearing peers, but there is no reason a deaf child should do any worse than a hearing child. On health, 70% of deaf people who have not been to a GP recently wanted to go but did not, mainly because there was no interpreter available. Deaf people who have been told that they might have high blood pressure are three times more likely than everyone else not to have it under control. Deaf people are almost twice as likely as others to experience mental health issues, which can be exacerbated by social exclusion. A health economics study showed that eliminating poor diagnosis could save the NHS £30 million annually—and it is worth noting that 90% of deaf children are born into hearing families.

The call to Government is that the deaf community want them to acknowledge the benefits of legal recognition of BSL and commit to establishing a UK-wide sign language framework consultation for a UK-wide sign language Act. The British Deaf Association is asking for this consultation process to be led by an appropriate Department whose remit covers language. However, that is another major obstacle and it prompts a question for the Minister: which Department and which Minister lead on BSL? I have been writing for some time to try to find out. I even tabled a parliamentary question to the Cabinet Office and the answer that question elicited was that

“all Government departments have a responsibility to create inclusive communications. This does not mean promoting BSL as an activity in itself but it does mean identifying and meeting the communication needs of the audiences we are targeting”.

I am sorry, Minister, but that answer is nowhere near clear enough and I think it demonstrates why BSL is stranded. No Department is responsible for it; no Minister is responsible for it; there is no champion in Government who is responsible for it; there is no advocacy for it; and there is no progress on it.

Finally on BSL, there is the case for a British Sign Language GCSE. Although BSL is a recognised language within the UK, a GCSE that can be taught in schools is not available. A GCSE on BSL has already been piloted and is largely ready to go, but the Department for Education is declining to give it the go-ahead. There is a principle of fairness and justice here. BSL is an official language in the UK that is used by tens of thousands of people. Not allowing BSL to be taught as a GCSE implies that it has a lower status and importance than other subjects, and that could even be seen as discriminatory against deaf people. Also, we do not have enough deaf interpreters. Judging by the briefings that we have all received, I think that there are 800 to 900 registered deaf interpreters, which is clearly inadequate to deal with more than 100,000 people.

The last of the three issues that I will raise today is the implementation of the action plan on hearing loss. When the Department of Health and NHS England published that plan in March 2015, it was widely welcomed. This cross-Government plan not only recognised hearing loss as a major public health issue, but highlighted the major impacts of hearing loss. It also committed the Government to improving services for everyone living with hearing loss. In addition, it set out the need to reduce variation in the provision of services, through the development of guidelines by NICE on adult-onset hearing loss.

The action plan set out five key objectives in the following areas: earlier diagnosis; good prevention; integrated services; increased independence and ageing; and good learning outcomes. There was wide support for the plan. As part of the implementation, NHS England published its new national commissioning framework for hearing loss services in July 2016. It is essential that information about that framework is properly disseminated by NHS England and that the framework is fully adopted by clinical commissioning groups. To help with that dissemination, in September, NHS England published its “What Works Guides—Action Plan on Hearing Loss”, which provides advice to commissioners and providers on supporting people with hearing loss in a variety of different settings.

NHS England is also set to publish guidance imminently, setting out the need for health and wellbeing boards to consider people with hearing loss when they are commissioning services, as well as considering its data tool. In this case, the requests made of Government would be fairly straightforward to meet, because the frameworks are in place.

The UK Council on Deafness is asking the Government to work with NHS England, commissioners and professional bodies for medical professionals to raise the importance of early diagnosis of hearing loss; produce an analysis of the case for hearing screening, potentially adding it to the NHS health check that is provided to people in England aged between 40 and 70; and raise the importance of promoting the commissioning framework through NHS England. The framework provides a clear alternative to the decommissioning of hearing aids, and CCGs should be aware of it when designing and commissioning local services.

It is fair to say that on the three major issues I have raised today the Government have a mixed report card. On Access to Work, the Government started very positively, then faltered and now could be going backwards. We need the response of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to my question in the main Chamber today on the need to continue to look at the evidence to make serious progress, because the evidence, as I hope I have laid out, is very much there.

On BSL, the Government never really got started. That is not just the Minister's Government; that is “the British Government”, a phrase that covers both sides of the Chamber. We are still stalled on BSL and there is no sign of an ignition switch to start us moving again. We need a champion of BSL in Government.

On the action plan, the Government started well and maintained progress, but they need to move through the gears now to ensure that that progress continues and secures the promised outcomes. We only need more of the same, because the start in this area was welcomed by the whole deaf and hearing loss community.

Finally, this is an important debate and I am grateful that so many colleagues have managed to be here to participate. I am also grateful for the opportunity to open the debate and I look forward to the contributions that will follow.

1.48 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe.

I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing this debate and on setting out his case with his customary courtesy and passion. He has been a champion of these issues for many years, so I pay him heartfelt tribute for that.

As the hon. Gentleman said, this is the first debate in the House to be transmitted via British Sign Language. Unfortunately, news of that came too late for one of my constituents, Christopher Jones, who wanted to attend, but decided not to travel down from Milton Keynes because he did not think that this facility would be available. Mr McCabe, perhaps you could report back to the Speaker and the Panel of Chairs that we should consider providing this interpretation not only during debates on this subject, but during general debates more widely, so that we are as accessible as possible to all our constituents.

I will focus on the introduction of a nationwide telecommunication relay service—something that Mr Jones came to see me about a few weeks ago. In most advanced economies, a nationwide TRS provides functionally equivalent telephone transmission services to deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals. A TRS is a telephone transmission service that allows an individual who is deaf or hard of hearing to have the same telephone availability as someone who is of good hearing. As telephone services and technologies evolve, so does the scope and achievement of functional equivalence. At one time, typed text communication was considered the functional equivalent of voice communication, but in the 21st century, captioning, video and other technologies have changed what equivalency means. The gaps between what is available to hearing individuals and those with hearing deficiency are growing. Sadly, the UK, which was the first to introduce such systems, now lags well behind other countries such as the USA, Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

The issue of functionally equivalent telephone services must be addressed. It includes, but is not limited to: the unrestricted availability of relay services 24 hours a day, seven days a week; emergency preparedness and response, to ensure the delivery of relay services in the event of disruptions to telecommunications services; international capacity; and access to the full array of existing telephone services offered by telecommunications companies. Competition, innovation and choice are important, so that users can access a wide range of services. What works for some people in some circumstances might be different from what others need. There are different facilities available, and it is important that each user can choose the system that works best for them at any one time. That might mean one individual having different things at different times. My constituent said that he would use one means to communicate with his family, and a different one for business conversations. Many other issues need to be considered.

While these may seem like lofty goals, they are being delivered in the countries I mentioned. For example, Australia provides the following relay services: textphone to voice and voice to textphone; textphone voice carry-over; textphone hearing carry-over; speech to speech; video relay services; internet relay; mobile text relay; mobile SMS relay; captioned telephone for phone and web; and captioned telephone to Braille display. In Australia, the system has operated as a national service since 1995 and is available to every Australian at no additional cost, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

[Iain Stewart]

A number of studies since the system's introduction have looked at its impact. We might think some of the findings are obvious, but it is important to mention them. Access to enhanced relay services is positively associated with reductions in feelings of frustration with telephone use. It gives individuals a much higher quality of life. It not only allows access to work, as the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse mentioned, but is proven to reduce the wider health consequences that can arise from isolation, such as mental health issues. The cost saving is likely to exceed the cost of introducing the service. I think I heard him mention that £30 million annually could be saved from the health and social care budget if many of these feelings of social exclusion were dealt with.

Ironically, my constituent was involved in designing and setting up such a system many years ago. It had to close down in 2008 as he could not make it work, and part of the problem was bureaucratic muddle and delay. The issue is often cross-departmental. We have a Minister from the Department of Health here, but the matter is as much for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Work and Pensions. The potential benefits of the system my constituent introduced could not be realised because there was buck-passing and delays, and the approach was not joined up.

My call today is for the Minister to take away these points and discuss them with his colleagues in DWP and DCMS, and to drive forward the introduction of a nationwide service in this country. It is embarrassing that while we were one of the first to introduce such systems, we have fallen back over a number of decades. Other countries are now way ahead of us. I urge the Minister and his colleagues to look at the evidence, particularly from Australia, on what can be done cost-effectively. This is not just about money; it is about quality of life. We owe it to all our constituents to give them as much access to the world of work and public services as anyone else, and my suggestion is a fairly straightforward way to do that. I urge the Minister to look at the evidence from other countries and discuss it with his colleagues.

1.56 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I begin by echoing the tribute paid to my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for securing this debate. As we have heard, there are a number of dimensions and aspects to deafness, but I want to focus on one issue: the criteria for receiving cochlear implants under the NHS. My argument today is simple: the criteria should be reviewed so that it is easier to get an implant. That would transform the lives of those who need this technology, and improve the lives of their families and loved ones. It would be a prudent investment, because it would obviate the need for more expenditure further down the line as a consequence of people not receiving the implants they desperately need.

I will tell the story of my constituent, Lamina Lloyd. Until last year, Lamina had a flourishing career as the manager of a local citizens advice bureau. However, Lamina has Meniere's disease, which has resulted in progressive hearing loss—so much so that last year she

had to give up work. She has two children who themselves have additional needs. She can no longer hear her children, who have to act as her ears. She describes her family as having gone from being an outdoor family to one that rarely leaves the house. Lamina is an intelligent, capable person, but hearing loss has meant the end of her career, a diminishment in the quality of her family life, and increasing isolation.

To try to alleviate her condition, Lamina wears the most powerful hearing aids available, turned up to maximum volume, but they make little difference and give her frequent ear infections and headaches from their feedback and squealing noises. She can no longer hear music or follow conversations, yet she has been in a battle—that is the only word for it—for the past two years to try to get a cochlear implant. She falls just 5 dB short, which is no more than a whisper, of the 90 dB hearing loss threshold for consideration for an implant. That threshold is one of the strictest in the western world. It is estimated that only 5% of those who could benefit from the technology get access to it in the UK.

Lamina describes her condition as being too deaf to hear, yet not deaf enough to get the help that could make a huge difference to her life. Her hearing has deteriorated even further in recent months, and she has an appointment to be assessed at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham in two weeks' time, but she and many others in her position have serious reservations about how the assessments are made. The Bamford-Kowal-Bench test uses short sentences in lab conditions. It does not replicate normal conversation or real-world conditions. Lamina and many others feel that that tool is not fit for the purpose of properly measuring hearing ability and hearing loss.

Even if Lamina is approved for an implant, why has it taken so long? Why do we put people and their families through such pain before giving them the help that could be life changing? My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse raised those issues in an Adjournment debate earlier this year, and briefly at the beginning of his speech today. He was told earlier this year that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence was launching a consultation on the relevant guidelines. That has not happened. The guidelines have been in place since 2009, but technology and costs have moved on a great deal since then.

I wish to ask the Minister a few questions. If he cannot respond to them all today, I would be very happy for him to consult with colleagues and write to me, and other Members participating in the debate, with a more considered response. First, why has the NICE consultation, which we were promised would be launched this summer, not yet been launched, and when will it be? Secondly, does he agree that Lamina's case and many similar cases around the country show that there is an overwhelming argument for revising those criteria?

Thirdly, whatever hearing loss threshold is picked, does the Minister agree that the hearing loss test needs to be done in real-world conditions that approximate to how people actually live their lives and conduct conversations, and so on? Fourthly, and perhaps most fundamentally, why does it take so long for people to get an implant? Why is it such a battle? The NHS is there for those who need it; it should not be an organisation that people have to battle with to get the treatment that

they need. Had my constituent been helped earlier, she might still be in a job. She would not need to rely on the state for financial support, and her family would not have had to go through the huge difficulties that they have all been through together over the last couple of years.

It is time for a step change in the urgency with which the issue of cochlear implants is treated. The guidelines must be revised. NICE needs to move on that soon, so that the suffering of my constituent Lamina Lloyd, and the many people around the country who are in a similar position, can be alleviated.

Jim Fitzpatrick: On a point of order, Mr McCabe. I asked my staff to monitor the transmission of the sign language. It is not being broadcast; the cameras do not meet the interpreters. Westminster Hall debates do not have subtitles, unlike in the main Chamber. Obviously I would very much appreciate it if you took that matter back to the Panel of Chairs and discussed it in due course.

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): I understand that the sign language is being filmed today, and when the debate is re-broadcast it will appear in a box, as is normal in other TV transmissions. Obviously this is an early stage. I will report back on how the whole debate goes and any points that Members raise, but I understand that the arrangements for today are that when the debate is re-broadcast, the sign language will appear.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful for that clarification, Mr McCabe.

2.3 pm

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing this important debate; it is a real pleasure for me to speak in it. I also think it is an absolutely fantastic move that today's debate is being signed. I advocate that more debates held in the Chamber be signed. It should be the norm in the House of Commons, not an exception to the rule.

I was very keen to speak in this debate about deafness and hearing loss, because it has had a major effect on my family. Rather than focusing on the many issues that affect deaf people in this country, I want to share with hon. Members an example of how deafness has affected my life.

Twenty-five years ago, at the age of 40, my mum lost her hearing literally overnight, due to a virus. She woke up one morning and could not hear any more. She had not been ill and had never had any hearing problems, but she went from being a hearing person one day to having no hearing the next day. At that time, we had a really good ear, nose and throat hospital in Maidstone. About a week after my mum lost her hearing, my father took her there, and it was confirmed that she had no hearing. The hospital staff put her on steroids and told her that it was due to a virus, that the hairs in her ears had died and that it was very unlikely she would ever get her hearing back.

That was absolutely devastating for my mother and for us all—my sister, myself and my dad. It changed her—and our—life fundamentally. We could not communicate with her; everything had to be written down. My mum

could not sign or lip-read, so she was flung into isolation and, quite honestly, a state of depression. It was a really tough time. She had two teenage girls who were at that time very much into their singing, and all of a sudden, my mum had to accept that she would never again be able to hear her daughters sing.

Due to the abruptness of her hearing loss, it was really difficult to mitigate some of the emotional damage she suffered. The NHS looked after her and the staff tried to help her. They gave her lip-reading classes and offered her support with a counsellor; they even put her in contact with another lady in the country who had lost her hearing overnight, but my mum was still mourning the loss of something that she was never going to get back. Importantly, she was never told that she was a candidate to have a cochlear implant—that reinforces the point made by the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden).

Deafness is the invisible disability. My mum did not look like she had a disability. Her voice sounded like it always had, because she had been a hearing person for 40 years, but I saw and experienced at first hand the major barriers that people who are deaf have to face. I recognise that there are strong differences between individuals who have been born deaf, those who have gradual hearing loss, and those who had hearing loss as a small child, perhaps due to meningitis or some other illness, but the biggest thing for my mum was that she did not have any deaf friends. We did not even know any deaf people.

Particularly acute was the fact that my mum's opportunities were severely limited. She had looked after me and my sister at home, but was looking forward to going back to work because we were now in our teens. All of a sudden, she found that she was unable to work, because she did not have the confidence, and it was very difficult for her to understand anyone at that time. The opportunities open to her were therefore extremely limited.

Eventually, after eight years, my mum decided that she wanted to do something about her hearing loss. She went to the doctors, and they talked to her about whether she could be a candidate for a cochlear implant. She was told that she would have been able to access one immediately, because of the severity of her hearing loss, but it then took another two years for her to have an implant, because 25 years ago the funding was quite a challenge, due to the fact that such procedures were not as frequent as they are now.

After 10 years of suffering, being isolated, suffering with depression and being unable to go back to work, she finally had the cochlear implant. Sadly for her, after a year of travelling to St Thomas' hospital, with its fabulous technicians, led by Terry Nunn, it was decided that the cochlear implant had not worked. She therefore had to go back for a further implant. Many people will not understand that a cochlear implant does not bring someone's hearing back. They do not hear like they did when they were a hearing person, but it gives them some quality of life.

Technology has changed, and 25 years on, cochlear implants are available not just in London, but all over the country. What is very clear is that the sooner someone has a cochlear implant after the loss of hearing, the greater impact it will have on how that person hears. I was extremely worried on reading the reports, which have

[*Kelly Tolhurst*]

already been mentioned, that some clinical commissioning groups are now looking at stopping hearing aid provision. One of the only things that kept my mother going through those 10 years was that she was using a hearing aid. It did not help her hearing—all it did was accentuate the background noises and cut out some of her tinnitus some of the time—but if she had not had access to that service in the time before having a cochlear implant, it would have been even worse. In my view, hearing aids are a cheap way of having an impact on people who are suffering from gradual hearing loss. I find it quite frightening that CCGs would even be considering stopping that support, and I think it is a dangerous road to go down.

As hon. Members have already said, hearing loss, even if it is mild, sends people into isolation. They might not put themselves into certain situations because of fear of not understanding or not being able to hear what is going on. I used to go into the supermarket with my mother and people would ask her if she would like a carrier bag, but because she did not hear them, they would think she was rude. They might make a rude comment to her because of that, but she actually could not hear them. Hearing aids are massively important and can be an important way of keeping people out of that isolation and of maintaining their contact with the health service so that the hearing loss can be monitored.

It is not often talked about, but people who suffer from hearing loss and deafness are also very embarrassed by their disability. If it was physically visible, everybody would be talking about that kind of disability. People would be banging the drum and asking for support from the Government and different organisations; but deaf people work, get on with their lives and rarely moan very much. They put up with quite a lot. Because they do not have a visible characteristic, it is very difficult for hearing people to truly understand the isolation, depression and mental health issues that they are subjected to.

I have spoken today very much from an emotional point of view about a real-life situation that has affected me. I hope that what I have said has illustrated that deafness can take many different forms; it occurs not just in old age, or from birth. For too long, deaf people have been disadvantaged and isolated. It is really good to have this debate, and I join the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse in supporting the cause of the UK Council on Deafness. All its recommendations are well thought out, meaningful and realistic asks. I hope that anyone who is deaf who watches this debate next week will see that it is good to have such debates in Parliament, and that we care about deafness in this country and the people who suffer from it. I am pleased to have been able to speak today.

2.14 pm

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I join other hon. Members in congratulating the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing the debate. I was chair of the all-party parliamentary group on deafness, but was rudely interrupted in 2015 when something else happened. It is a pleasure to be back and to serve as vice-chair of the APPG under the hon. Gentleman's excellent chairmanship.

I commend the previous speakers' comments about cochlear implants. I remember 20 or 30 years ago, when they really began to take off. The difference between now and then is absolutely huge. That overlaps with what the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) described of her mother's experience. I thank her for that moving speech. Her mum will be proud of her, I am absolutely sure of that. I can relate to a lot of the things that her mum went through. I have been deaf for about 50 years of my life.

Cochlear implants have made a huge difference and the improvement is absolutely massive. The Minister is from the Department of Health—he is an old colleague from coalition days; it is good to see him—and I ask him to explore how cochlear implants can be ever more available, because they do much more now and they do it much earlier. They are a game-changer. For many years after they first came out, a long, long time ago, they really did not make that much of a difference. There was vigorous opposition from a lot of the British Sign Language community, and I understand why. That has changed a great deal over the years and cochlear implants are now, in many ways, the future for transforming deafness. I never really believed it in the old days, but now I do, because of the advances.

I would like to cover a few areas, a couple from the UK Council on Deafness angle and a couple specifically because we have a Health Minister here. British Sign Language is a different language. I am hard of hearing and have been since having measles when I was six. Sometimes, people might say to me, "Stephen, are you a member of the deaf community?" and I would say, "No, I am a member of the hearing community. I just don't hear very well." That is an important point, because they are completely different. The deaf community is a community. The BSL community is a completely different community, with cultural norms and a different language. BSL is not even a direct translation of my speech; it is different. Sometimes people do not understand that. They would say to me, "Why don't you learn BSL?" and I would say, "Because I am a member of the hearing community, I just don't hear very well, and it is a different language." I am very supportive of profoundly deaf people trying to get BSL as a recognised language, as has happened, I believe, in Holyrood in Scotland.

I remember just before 2015 having meetings with a number of people down from Scotland and we were watching that development with great interest. Once it happens in one legislative House, it is very hard for other legislative Houses not to follow, so I say good luck with that up in Scotland, because it is a game-changer. It will happen eventually in Westminster. When it does, it is not just a label. When a nation says that a language is a statutory language, it means it is accessible and that public bodies have to provide information in that language, and that will make a huge difference for a lot of profoundly deaf people. I will tell hon. Members why and give one very good example.

I have been involved for many years in politics around deafness as a trustee of this or a patron of that, or what have you. I knew a lot of people who are profoundly deaf working in that area, including from the British Deaf Association. I just came from a statement this morning in which the Secretary of State for the Department for Work and Pensions mentioned that about 50% of disabled people are out of work. I tell you

what, Mr McCabe, it is a hell of a lot higher than that for the profoundly deaf. I do not have the figures because no one really finds them. The DWP—it used to drive me crazy when I was here before—will not slice the different disabilities up. It just says “problems with deafness and problems with visual impairment”, which completely denies the separateness of deafness. Off the bat, though, I would say that profoundly deaf people have an unemployment rate of around 70%, which is just ridiculous. How can we possibly have 100,000 people—if not more—of adult working age and have such barriers that 70% are unemployed? It is a blooming outrage! Now that I am back in the House, which is wonderful for the people of Eastbourne—I thank them—I am determined to lobby hard to make BSL an accepted language.

I am also keen to join the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse in lobbying on Access to Work. The Government have done a great thing with Access to Work—I think it was John Major’s Government that started it. Access to Work is a good thing which has made a huge difference to a lot of people, and I am a big supporter of it, but there is a challenge. It has made a great difference for people who are in work and acquire a disability through illness, a catastrophic incident or what have you—it has been fantastic in helping them to stay in work. I want it to be improved, particularly in the small and medium-sized enterprises sector, so that SMEs understand that they can employ people with disabilities. Access to Work provides a lot of the money that will buy an induction loop, put in a ramp, or do whatever is necessary to help an employer take on a disabled person. That is really important. Corporates kind of get it—they are huge, and they have massive human resources departments and pots of money, so they try to do their best. It is much harder for an SME employing three people. If I were the director of a plumber working seven days a week, and someone with disability came to see me, it would be so much easier to say, “No, no,” and find an excuse not to employ them. Access to Work often provides the money that allows the SME to take on that disabled person.

I will let the House into a vast secret. I say this with authority, because I used to be a consultant in this area for years. If a business employs disabled people, they get lower churn.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab) *rose*—

Stephen Lloyd: I have seen that in call centres, in businesses and in numerous other areas. I used to be very involved with the Federation of Small Businesses, and I am sure I will be again now I am back. Lower churn is really important for businesses if a lot of their spend goes on employing people. At a later date, I will explain why it leads to lower churn, but it does.

Matt Western: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Lloyd: Yes, certainly—sorry.

Matt Western: The hon. Gentleman is talking about the challenges that SMEs have in employing people with such impairments. Does he agree that it is difficult for many people who suffer from deafness or failing hearing to progress within organisations because of the cap? It is therefore almost self-enforcing that those people are pressed into part-time working.

Stephen Lloyd: That is a very good example. I have no hearing on my left, so I could not hear the hon. Gentleman trying to intervene. Jim knows to punch me.

The hon. Gentleman is right. There are issues to do with Access to Work. As it has expanded and cost a lot more money over the years, the Government—I am not chucking stones, as I know how challenging it is to work within the Budget envelope—have introduced more and more caps. Rather than focusing on different ways of capping Access to Work, I would like the DWP—the Minister can go back and tell his colleagues—to focus on better and more creative ways to use the money. I know from years of experience—colleagues will have to take my word for it—that the majority of disabled people who get into a job, are properly managed and have the right support, stay there for years. That costs much less money than constantly having to re-employ. I thank the hon. Gentleman for the intervention.

I want to talk about two key areas that are specific to the Minister’s brief. One of the things I fought for last time I was here—I am going to do so now as the Minister is in Health—was an automatic invitation for a hearing aid screening whenever someone hits pension age. That would be at 65 or 66, although that was under the coalition—I think retirement age is 150 now. That is significant because something like 50% of people over the age of 65, heading up to 60% as they get older, begin to get age-onset hearing loss. My hearing loss is not age-onset, although I am old enough now—it was measles, as I said—and the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse is far too young, so his cannot possibly be age-onset. The thing with hearing loss is that the vast majority of people ignore it for 15 years because it is not a sexy disability. The hon. Member for Rochester and Strood flagged that up, and it is true. People start losing their hearing, they do not admit to it, their husband or wife goes potty, the volume is turned up massively on the television, and eventually their kids drag them to the audiology department, if it is still open—we will come to that—in their mid-70s.

The problem with that—there is significant data to prove this, which I will happily share with the Minister another time—is that the longer someone takes to get a hearing aid, the lower the chance of it working. The difference between a 75-year-old and a 65-year-old in acuity terms is enormous. Hearing aids are not like glasses. If I cannot see properly, I put glasses on and I have 20:20 vision. Hearing aids do not replace lost sound; all they do is amplify the residual hearing. Let me try to explain that to colleagues very quickly. Imagine a radio with a battery that is running down. If the volume is turned up, it makes a lot more sound, but it is very discordant. That is what hearing aids do.

I was pressing very hard for the Department of Health to run a pilot so that all people who get to pensionable age receive an invite to audiology or wherever—it could be a pharmacy, for that matter—to have a hearing test. My rationale for that, which was supported by pretty much every group that could possibly be imagined, including NICE, was that if people get in early, they are forced to accept they are losing their hearing. They get a hearing aid, and ipso facto it is much easier to get used to. My view, which is shared by many others, is that that would be a huge advantage, not least in reducing the levels of dementia. We have discovered that dementia is linked to social isolation, and old people who are deaf or hard of hearing tend to isolate.

[Stephen Lloyd]

The Department of Health agreed in principle to run a pilot. It took me a long time to get that agreement, because the Department did not want to do it. It knew that I was right and all those extra hearing aids were going to cost a lot more money. Then there was a tragedy, colleagues: I lost the election. I was not there to nag like hell, and it sort of disappeared and was put on the back burner. I am delighted to see that my old colleague is now the Minister. I am sure that, now I have put that on the table, he will move heaven and earth to develop it into a pilot. It will make a huge difference to hundreds of thousands of people—I am deadly serious—so I encourage that.

It is easy to cut hearing aids, because it is mostly old people who use them. They are not organised and are not going to complain like hell; they are isolated, anyway. As I said, they are in their mid-70s by the time they go to audiology departments. I am really pretty angry that a lot of CCGs are getting away with beginning to trim audiology services because there are not enough people fighting their corner. I know that CCGs are independent, but the Minister and I also know that there are protocols. In his response, I ask that he make a commitment that CCGs will be told how important audiology and hearing aids are. They must not use the austerity challenges they face to cut audiology. On that note, I again thank the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse for securing this debate.

2.28 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing the debate. Colleagues have spoken very movingly about their personal experiences.

It is great to see my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) in his place as the responding Minister. I am sure he will do this ably, but it is an indication of the challenges that the hard-of-hearing and deaf community face that hon. Members have mentioned five Departments that have issues that need to be addressed: the Department of Health, the Department for Education, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Work and Pensions. That shows that by working in departmental silos, there is perhaps a danger that some of challenges that we are hearing about today are not being properly addressed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse is a champion for the deaf and hard-of-hearing community. I will briefly highlight the work of another such champion, Ann Jillings, from Lowestoft, who is working with passion and determination to secure the best possible education for her son, Daniel. In doing so, she is campaigning for other parents of deaf children in north Suffolk. Daniel started at Bungay High School in September. He is doing well and there is good package of support in place for him, but Ann had to fight very hard to get that and she continues to campaign for a hearing impaired unit in north Suffolk.

It is clear that not just in Suffolk but across the country, deaf children do not get the right support right from the start, so they cannot always realise their full potential at school. That can put them at a considerable

disadvantage for the rest of their lives. We need to break down these barriers and create a properly funded national framework, within which local education authorities such as Suffolk County Council can provide a good education and support service locally. If they do not do that, they must be held to account.

The National Deaf Children's Society, which does great work campaigning for deaf children to have the same opportunities as everyone else, has highlighted four issues on which Government action is needed to break down the barriers that deaf children face. First, the NHS needs to improve the quality of children's hearing services. The National Deaf Children's Society highlighted in its Listen Up! campaign that, across the country, many such services have significant shortcomings and are failing to meet the necessary audiology standards. The quality assurance process that was previously in place has ended, and it has not been replaced by any other mandatory process.

The NDCS has a three-point action plan to address this particular problem. First, NHS England must ensure that the children's audiology services that it directly commissions, such as for the under-fives, comply with the IQIPs—improving quality in physiological services—accreditation programme. Secondly, it is vital that that programme is more transparent, so that families know whether their services are good quality or whether they need to improve. Thirdly, the accreditation must be compulsory, so that all paediatric audiology services move towards running a good-quality operation.

My second point relates to access to radio waves technology for deaf children. Radio aids play a vital role in helping deaf children to hear speech; they enable them to better understand their teacher, and they have a big impact on improving parent-child communication. Despite the obvious benefits, most local authorities do not currently make radio aids available for use by families in the home. The NDCS is calling on local authorities and the Department for Education to ensure that every child who could benefit from a radio aid is given access to one at the earliest possible opportunity. To do that, the Department for Education should encourage local authorities to make use of their special provision capital fund, to provide radio aids where they are needed.

My third point relates to the need for a GCSE in British Sign Language. The Government really must listen to the right to sign campaign, to make British Sign Language available as a GCSE that can be taught in school. Ann Jillings points out that it is the first language of deaf children, so it is discriminatory that deaf children do not have the opportunity to achieve what is probably the most widely recognised qualification, and that it is given a lower status than other languages. There are other accredited qualifications in British Sign Language, but they are not widely available to children in schools and they are less likely to be recognised by employers. Daniel Jillings achieved his BSL level 1 three years ago, but it was not funded. Ann tutored him and paid for all the assessments herself. There is a compelling case for a GCSE in BSL, based on equality, the denial of choice for deaf children and the unnecessary barrier that it poses to further and higher education, and thereafter, entry to the workplace. That barrier must be removed. A GCSE has already been piloted and is largely ready to go. The Department for Education must make an exception to its blanket policy of not allowing any new GCSEs to be developed.

My fourth and final point relates to the special educational needs and disabilities framework. The Children and Families Act 2014 made significant changes to the SEND framework. One key change was replacing SEND statements with EHC—education, health and care—plans. The deadline for implementing those changes is April next year. There is a concern that many schools and local education authorities are struggling to implement the changes in time. In Suffolk, Ofsted and the CQC identified weaknesses in the county council's practices in meeting the requirements of the Act.

Authorities such as Suffolk must be provided with sufficient funding so that they can meet their obligations. Although the high needs block, which funds SEND support, has been protected in cash terms, it has not been adjusted to reflect a variety of additional challenges: the rising number of children and young people requiring additional support; the greater local authority responsibility for young children with SEND aged between 16 and 25 and in early years; and a trend towards placing more children in special schools. More money needs to be made available and Ofsted needs to review how it can strengthen the accountability framework around SEND and how it inspects schools.

Ann Jillings has gone that extra mile and works tirelessly to ensure that Daniel gets the opportunity to have the best possible start in life and the best possible education, so that he can realise his full potential. There are many barriers that have been placed in her way in pursuit of that goal. I suggest that it is our duty, the duty of Government and of local authorities to remove those barriers as soon as possible.

2.37 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to see you in the chair, Mr McCabe. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for securing this important debate. The contributions so far have been fantastic.

There are two issues in particular that affect deaf and hard-of-hearing people that I wish to raise today: the accreditation of children's hearing services, and the cap on the Access to Work scheme grants, which have already been mentioned. There are more than 50,000 deaf children across the UK and an estimated 794 deaf children in the Bristol area alone. For those children, high-quality audiology services are vital to carry out tests, fit and maintain hearing aids and provide rehabilitative support. Despite that, the Government have stopped mandatory inspections of services, instead replacing them with the improving quality in physiological services accreditation programme. Since the voluntary programme started in 2012, only 15% of children's audiology services have achieved IQIPs accreditation. That means that 85% cannot guarantee that their service is good quality. That lack of transparency is unacceptable and leaves far too many families in the dark about the quality of their child's audiology service. Obviously, it is of immense importance to parents that their children have access to good services. Some services have stepped up to the starting blocks by signing up to the scheme, such as St Michael's Hospital in Bristol which serves my constituents, and a few are nearing the finish line and accreditation, but too many are not taking part at all.

The National Deaf Children's Society, through its Listen Up! campaign, is calling on the Government and NHS England to make assessments of children's

audiology services mandatory and for information from these assessments to be publicly available. I support that campaign and implore the Government and NHS England to implement changes to help ensure that deaf children get the quality of service they deserve. That could make so much difference to their future life chances.

The second issue is the cap on Access to Work grants. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse, Access to Work enables many disabled people to overcome work-related obstacles by providing practical advice and support, and grants towards extra employment costs that cannot be met by employers as reasonable adjustments. A Government review in 2004—some time ago—suggested that for every £1 spent on Access to Work, £1.48 was generated for the Treasury. I am deeply concerned about the effects of the cap on Access to Work grants that the Department for Work and Pensions imposed for new claimants in 2015 on the career prospects of deaf and hard-of-hearing employees. That cap is due to come into force for existing claimants in April next year. It is currently set at £42,100 per year, which is one and a half times the national average salary. Although that may be enough support for some people, for others it is not.

I was contacted about this debate by a deaf constituent who uses British Sign Language and works as a disability adviser at an education establishment. Access to Work helps him participate fully and equally at work by paying the cost of communication support—namely, British Sign Language interpreters. Such support is inevitably expensive—it is necessary to pay people's wages—so it is unlikely to be classed as a reasonable adjustment for his employer. At the moment, he can access those interpreters' support throughout his working week. The cap means that he will be able to book interpreters for three days a week at most, leaving him with two days when he will not be able to communicate with his colleagues and clients. That means he will be unable to do his job effectively.

Access to Work revolutionised deaf people's career opportunities, shattering the glass ceiling that previously limited them to manual jobs. It is largely due to Access to Work that deaf people have progressed as far as their talent allows. There are now deaf chief executive officers, deaf intermediaries working at the Ministry of Justice, deaf theatre directors and deaf social workers. Yet research conducted earlier this year by DeafATW found that the cap on Access to Work grants is already having a detrimental effect on the deaf community. We heard the figures from my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse. On behalf of my constituent and all those in the deaf community who have benefited or stand to benefit from that scheme, I implore the Minister to listen to what is being said, remove or raise the Access to Work cap, and once again lift the ceiling on the career aspirations of those who are deaf or hard of hearing.

2.43 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe, and a pleasure to speak in a debate secured by my good friend the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). We have been on many campaigns together over the years, not least in our previous careers.

I need to declare an interest at the outset. I have been honorary patron of the Hertfordshire Hearing

[*Sir Mike Penning*]

Advisory Service—a fantastic charity that works not only in Hertfordshire but across many counties—for more than 10 years.

I disagree with hardly anything that has been said in this really positive debate. I think that people watching and others will realise that the House can work together not only for people who are hard of hearing, but for people who are hard of hearing and have other issues. We have not discussed the fact that people who are hard of hearing or deaf often have other ailments, which can be as difficult for them as being hard of hearing.

I can assure hon. Members from experience that Ministers usually do not like former Ministers to stand up and talk about things that they might know something about. For a short time, I was the disability Minister and responsible for Access to Work. Let me be positive about Access to Work and break some of the taboos about it. As we have heard, it is one of the great schemes for people across this great nation who had been left behind, ignored and told that they could not work. Employers told people that they could not employ them because it was not safe to do so. That was complete and utter rubbish. I do not have to take the hon. Gentleman's word for it, because there is evidence in the Department for Work and Pensions that people with disabilities work harder, are more likely to turn up for work and are more dedicated and more committed than any other employees. That is a fact. We know that.

I went around the country as part of the disability confident scheme trying to encourage employers to take on people with all types of disabilities. That was pretty easy with bigger companies. There are some fantastic large companies out there—particularly Royal Mail. It gets biffed around a little at times in the House, but its commitment to people who either arrive with disabilities or acquire disabilities during their employment is fantastic. However, it is really hard with small and medium-sized enterprises. There is a myth that there is a risk: people say, “Health and safety prevents me.” I was the Minister with responsibility for health and safety, too, and I was happy to go around and dispel that myth. We have to work really hard with SMEs.

Access to Work was fantastic in helping thousands of people to get into work and have the confidence to stay. The cap was brought in just before I became the Minister responsible, and one of the first things I said was, “Where is the Department's evidence that we need to do this and that the cap will work?” Let me put this on the record: there is evidence in the DWP, the Department knows exactly what it is, and it is continually reviewed. Ministers are taught always to say at the Dispatch Box, “The Government continue to keep under review” this, that or whatever. I assure hon. Members that the Department keeps that evidence under review.

It is a shame that my hon. Friend the Minister, who was my Parliamentary Private Secretary, is responsible for responding to this debate, but the DWP, which will see the record of this debate, knows whether the cap will work, is keeping it under review and needs to be open and honest about how it is working. If it is not working, it needs to be adjusted. As a former Minister, I will not have all that great work and all those people's aspirations and commitment to work lost because of a cap that does not actually save a huge amount of money in real terms.

Jim Fitzpatrick: The right hon. Gentleman makes the same points that we have all made. Access to Work is a great scheme. It works. As I understand it, the logic for the cap is that there is only so much money in the pot—that is always the case for Governments—and therefore its purpose is to try to spread what is available as widely as possible. But for people with fantastic talent who could be advocates and champions for the deaf community by becoming chief executives and leaders of their professions and so on, the glass ceiling has been reinforced, because they can now get only £43,000. This is not a criticism—well, it is in some respects—but we need to ensure that the evidence is looked at regularly.

Sir Mike Penning: Governments need to be kicked and beaten up when they get things wrong and praised when they get things right. I was proud that a Conservative Government brought in Access to Work, which is massively important. There will always be examples of abuse in the system and so on, but that does not give the Government carte blanche to say, “No, the only way this can work is with a cap,” particularly if the evidence does not show that a cap will work. The Minister will have looked twice when he came into the Chamber and realised what this debate would mostly be about, which is not his responsibility but the DWP's. I am more than happy to go across to my old Department and sit with my old officials and explain to them exactly where the evidence is in their cupboards.

Let me touch briefly on two other areas, and then on one thing that has not been touched on at all. I do not understand why, in the 21st century, a recognised language is not recognised in the House or across the country. I really do not understand why, all these years after I made a point of order in the main Chamber in 2005 to complain that a hearing loop was not available for my constituents when they were in the House—even when it was installed, it did not work properly—this is the first time a debate has been signed for our constituents. People will always go on about how that must cost more money. The cost is minimal compared with the benefit to our constituents of being part of the democratic process.

Stephen Lloyd: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for kicking off about the induction loop years ago, because I could not function as an MP in the Chamber without it.

Sir Mike Penning: The things I do for everybody in this House. It was genuinely embarrassing. I remember it vividly. I said to the Speaker, Michael Martin, “My constituents have come to see this world heritage site and their Parliament at work. I took them on a tour, and frankly they got hardly any benefit apart from visuals, because they couldn't understand or hear a word I was saying.” I seem to remember that there was the comment, from a sedentary position, “Well, they didn't miss very much,” but I was trying to get across a point. This is the mother of Parliaments, and as we have heard from colleagues, we are way behind the loop again. I am sorry to use that terrible pun, but we are really behind. I hope that we will have a lurch forward. I have noticed all the Clerks coming in, and have heard that the Speaker will be reported to, and all that, and that is great, but it is absolutely useless unless someone actually does something. Then we can move on. I know this is a trial, but signing should be transmitted live.

Secondly, there should be a GCSE. I find it fascinating: we can see all the different courses that our young people do in schools and colleges, yet they are excluded in this way. If people do not want any more GCSEs, we could drop one of the ones that would not get used anywhere near as much as this. It would make people aware. In my constituency, people who are not deaf or hard of hearing have said to me that they want to be able to communicate like this; they want to do these courses as well. They want to have a GCSE, so that they can chat away with their mates in that sort of way. That is a simple thing, and I cannot see huge cost implications, so it should be moved on, as we have heard this afternoon.

Finally, I will touch on people whose hearing has been impaired by industrial injuries. That has not been mentioned at all in the debate, but not because people think it should not be. It is just one of those issues. People cannot see this type of industrial injury. It is not like the industrial injuries that my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse and I saw in our former jobs as firemen. There is something very wrong about how we measure industrial injuries, and hearing impairment industrial injuries in particular. So many people who have a hearing impairment do not admit it to themselves, their wives and their loved ones, even though their wives and loved ones are probably aware that there is an issue. They certainly do not talk about it to their employer or previous employers.

I can talk about this, because my eardrum is perforated. I did not know about that until I started to miss conversations that I thought I should be picking up. You just do not think there is something wrong. However, when I was a Minister at the Ministry of Defence, I had to have a medical before I was allowed to go into operational fields, and it was obvious that I had a perforated eardrum. It was almost certainly from live firing when I was in the armed forces—the specialists told me that—although it was not picked up then. That is not so important to me, but where industrial injuries are common, it is massively important that there be a level playing field on decibel levels. Completely different levels are used for hearing damage in the armed forces and what I call civvy street, and that cannot be right.

We must encourage people to come forward, not so much so that they can get compensation, but because, as we heard earlier, if we can pick this up earlier, it saves the state and everyone a lot of money, and also makes life much better for that person, who can start to accept the disability that they have and continue to live a happy life.

[Ms KAREN BUCK *in the Chair*]

Jim Fitzpatrick: When I had the hearing test that identified my audiological loss, as the right hon. Gentleman will know, the printout showed whether it was down to age or genetics, or whether it was industrial. Mine was at least partly industrial. I was told by my clinicians, “Your hearing loss is above the threshold for applying for industrial injury compensation.” I never did, because I had a great job here, so I did not have to, and it was not a matter of money. I have always felt a bit difficult about saying, “Well, I should have gone down as a statistic.” I am sure that, as the right hon. Gentleman says, there are a lot of us out there who have not registered and do not appear in the statistics. The base statistics are only of the people who absolutely needed to make sure that they registered.

Sir Mike Penning: Thank you very much—not Mr McCabe, but Ms Buck; I did a quick double-take. My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head. It is not just about the money. Getting people in, whether at pensionable age or when they leave an employer or the armed forces, is vital. When I left the armed forces, my hearing was not tested. It was supposed to have been tested, but it was not, and if anyone can find a record of it being tested then, I can take them on about that. I am not raising the issue of whether people are entitled to compensation—that is someone else’s decision—but they are not entitled to compensation unless we get them tested. If we can get them tested, the specialists will know, as my hon. Friend said, the cause of the deafness. There are myriad reasons, but industrial damage is pretty well defined.

I am thrilled that there are so many people here on a Thursday afternoon—the other Chamber probably has half, if not less than half, the amount of people we have here. Perhaps my hon. Friend and I might go back to the Backbench Business Committee to get a proper debate on the Floor of the House on some of the specifics we have discussed. If necessary, that should be on Access to Work, because that is a life-changer and has been for many people. We must not lose that life-changing ability.

2.56 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I will sign this comment: “Today, I will talk to you about deafness and hearing loss in Scotland.”

I will come back to my poor attempt at signing later. I wanted to speak about a number of things, many of which have already been mentioned. I very much welcome this debate and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on bringing it here. Indeed, I commend him on the work he has done through the all-party parliamentary group on deafness to raise this issue across the House.

There are approximately 1 million people in Scotland who suffer hearing loss, and I am one of them. About 15 years ago, I found that my hearing was deteriorating, and I did not do much about it—I was just very irritating to my friends and family, not hearing things. Eventually, I was persuaded to get treatment. I was diagnosed with degeneration in the inner ear, an inherited trait that means that I cannot hear some frequencies, but I can hear others. I hear some frequencies at full volume, and others at just 30% or 40%, which means I lose a lot of the sense of what people are saying to me.

I am beyond grateful to NHS Lothian and our public health service for what it has been able to do for me. I wear hearing aids, like my hon. Friend, and the degree of technology and sophistication in these little things is quite remarkable. There are mini-computers in here that take in all frequencies and decide to boost the ones that I am weak on, which means that, by and large, I can hear relatively normally. I also want to place on record the efforts of the House authorities. In particular, I find the loop in the Chamber very effective indeed.

Of course, there are still drawbacks; those who, like me, wear hearing aids will be aware of this. For example, when I am in the Chamber taking part in a debate and I have them on the setting for the loop, if a colleague sitting beside me says something, I do not get it; I have to reprogramme the aid and try to find out what they

[Tommy Sheppard]

were saying—or quite often I just nod and pretend I got the gist of what they were saying. I also notice that these aids can be irritating to me and others in close proximity, because of the feedback and whistling sound there is sometimes, but it is worth putting up with those minor drawbacks to take advantage of this great technology.

I got these hearing aids on the NHS, and I was very grateful indeed to receive them. These instruments are state-of-the-art technology that match anything available in the private sector. In fact, I have friends who, either through inclination or ignorance, decided to go private, and went to agencies on the high street that retail hearing aids, and their service is far inferior to mine. Eventually, on my advice, they went to the local audiology department and got better treatment.

That is just part of why I have a particular interest in the subject. I am of course also mindful that this is probably one of the most common disabilities that we as a species suffer. More of my constituents probably suffer hearing loss than voted for me on 8 June; that is how prevalent it is.

I want to spend a little time, because others have mentioned it, talking about the situation in Scotland, particularly with regard to BSL. Any BSL users watching what I did at the beginning will understand that I cannot sign, but I tried to learn that opening line because I know that, as time goes on, I will want to learn BSL, as it will be something that I rely on in later years and is therefore important to me, but it is important to me in the here and now because of so many people for whom BSL is a vital means of communication.

It has already been mentioned that in 2015 the Scottish Parliament passed the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act. A Labour MSP decided to bring it to Parliament. The Act was passed unanimously, with all five parties in full agreement. A key thing that the Act did was launch a process to establish a national action plan to promote and develop BSL in Scotland, with the simple objective of making Scotland the best place in the world to be a BSL user and to live, work and play. I say that not to blow Scotland's trumpet, although it is part of my brief to do that, and not to say that Scotland is better than the rest of the UK, but simply to say that if people took the time and sat down to talk about these things and draw up a plan, they would be surprised at how much can be done. I ask the Minister and the Government to look at the situation as it is developing in Scotland and perhaps see how much of that could be replicated UK-wide.

The national plan was published in September. It is quite detailed and has 70 targets. I will not go into them all; it is available on the Scottish Government website. The process was really important. Once time is provided in a Parliament for a discussion that leads to legislation, because of the statutory force of the discussions taking place, things that people had never thought about begin to go on the agenda and come out of the woodwork. It is a stimulus to all manner of people in civic society and in Government agencies in thinking about how they can improve the situation.

The plan of action has 70 detailed targets set for the next three years. I will give Members a flavour of them. The first is to look at how we can build into the 2021 census a question or series of questions that identify in

detail the number of BSL users taking part in the census, so that we have the data on which to plan in future. Target 10 talks about improving access to early years services, so that deaf children can access them. Target 16 is about removing the barriers that prevent BSL users from becoming teachers, so that they can not only teach in the medium of BSL, but teach hearing kids through interpretation. Target 25 is about targets for colleges and universities. Importantly, the next target makes loans available for BSL students. I am pleased to say that just this week the Scottish Government announced that loans will be available for students in Scotland to study throughout the UK if the course is not available in Scotland, so we now have a situation in which we can support BSL users who are students in Scotland, but who are able to go on courses in England and Wales as well.

Target 39 is about making sure that all our health screening and immunisation programmes have the medium of BSL built into them, so that BSL users have full access. Target 48 is about sport, and 53 is about placing obligations on transport and our rail and bus providers to make sure they understand the needs of BSL users and have it available as a means of communication. Target 57 is about access to the arts. Target 63 is about making sure that our emergency services understand the needs of BSL users and have a facility to be able to communicate with them. Finally, the last one I picked out is the target to improve electoral participation and voting in the political process by BSL users.

There is a series of very good targets, but probably the best thing about them is the way in which BSL users themselves have bought into the process and have become part of developing the action plan. A full £1.3 million has been provided to various deaf voluntary organisations to monitor how the targets develop and are implemented. In 2020 the intention is to come back with a full Government review across all agencies to make sure we look at the next stage. Those are practical, achievable steps that can be taken, many of which do not involve a lot of money. They can be done within existing budgets. They require changes in attitudes. We cannot overestimate the importance of having a statutory framework and setting all these things down as targets for Government agencies.

There is always pressure on a legislative programme, but a UK BSL Act that would do some of those things would not take a lot of parliamentary time. It need not be a very complicated Bill. It could be focused. Even if we had to give up three hours of a Back-Bench debate or two to get the measure through, it would be worth doing. I am sure that if the Government were to take the initiative, they would find all parties commending them.

Several people have mentioned Access to Work, but it is important to stress that claimants who had the benefit of the programme and were not limited until now—the cap applied to new claimants—will be subject to the cap as well. That will mean that some people who are in employment will have to reduce or leave their employment. That is the truth of the matter. It might not be a great number of people, but that is what will happen.

I note that the DWP says that only about 267 people will be affected by the cap. That is not a great number, but it really looks like penny-pinching when we compare it to the scale of the DWP budget.

Jim Fitzpatrick: The early statistics said that for every £1 spent on Access to Work, the Treasury got a cost-benefit analysis plus of £1.34 or £1.50. A lot of the people the hon. Gentleman describes are senior professionals, chief executives and so on, who will be on a 40% rate of tax, so it is an investment that will give the Treasury more money back than the basic rate of tax does.

Tommy Sheppard: I could not agree more. If somebody is in work and gets support through the scheme, not only are they earning money and paying tax, but the people who support them earn money and pay tax as well. There are all sorts of ways in which this makes sense. My key point is that given the small number of people affected, is the cap really worth it? Would it not be better to not have the cap, and assess the situation later? It is expensive because of the nature of the support that people need in this part of the programme if they are deaf and a BSL user. It is expensive because that support is undertaken by hard-working professional people such as the signers here today, who have trained very hard for the job that they do.

Perhaps in the future developments in audio technology and computer graphics will be such that we will get an app on our smartphone that will turn speech into sign in a way that works, but who knows? That is for the future. For now, we need professional human beings to be able to provide the service. We should accept as a society that for the limited number of people affected, the money is a price worth paying. We could perhaps look at other ways, rather than the cap and restricting the services provided, to reduce costs.

I want to finish by talking about Parliament and some of the things that we might be able to do here. It is wonderful that we have our proceedings signed today. I do not know why we do not have a signer standing beside the Speaker's Chair and filmed for all the proceedings in our Parliament. When we think of the amount of money we spend in this place, the number of staff that we have, the amount we spend on maintenance and the amount we are going to spend on refurbishment, it is not such a big price to make sure that during the 30 hours a week or whatever when the Chamber is in operation and debating, there is a signer there, signing for the people in the Chamber, and, more importantly, for the people who watch live online or wish to check back on proceedings.

Another thing that we could do has to do with the scheme in Parliament, which Members may be aware of—I have not taken advantage of it yet, but I am sure others have—to get tuition in a foreign language. Why do not we add BSL to that? Why does not each MP have an opportunity to learn that as part of our professional development as Members of Parliament, so that we are better able to communicate with our constituents, and more aware of the technological needs?

My central point, which I will stress as I end, is that it is impossible to overestimate the importance of a legislative framework, because of the sense of purpose it creates for civil society and statutory agencies, and the sense of worth, I suppose, that it gives to people who are looking to us to respond to their needs.

3.10 pm

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Buck. I too express gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), not just for obtaining the

debate, but for the work he has done on deafness and hearing loss for many years; he is a great champion of the cause. I also want to mention the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), who shared her personal story. I was struck by what she said about her mother's isolation, because my late mother-in-law was one of the most sociable people anyone could meet—show her a piano and she would play for two hours—but then she lost her hearing, and with that, she lost her social circle and became incredibly lonely. We hear a lot about elderly people being lonely, and I wonder how much hearing loss has to do with that.

The debate is very broad—as broad as the challenges that people living with deafness face; so I shall confine my remarks to two areas, the first of which is cochlear implants. A constituency case has been brought to me by several constituents, including the grandmother of Jacob, who needs a cochlear implant. He is profoundly deaf in the right ear and severely deaf in the left; he is four years old. He has been tested by St. Thomas' Hospital cochlear implant team, who supported the case for an implant, but the NHS has turned him down. The family have been told he can have the implant only if they can raise £44,000. My constituents are not the most affluent in the country, but they are truly wonderful, and this will not be the first time they have crowd-funded help for someone. Last year they helped a young mother to get a second stem cell transplant. Their campaign, "Help Jacob Hear", has run boot sales, raffles and fêtes and raised nearly all the money, which is great news—but it raises the question of what the NHS is for if it is not to help children such as Jacob. The spending of taxpayers' money at this point would potentially be handsomely repaid over the lifetime of that young boy. It might be expensive, but what is the financial and social expense of not funding it?

The second area I wanted to focus on is Access to Work. Quite a number of my constituents are British Sign Language interpreters, and many of them have written to me. One, Joanna, works regularly with people who are helped by Access to Work to participate equally and fully at work. In 2015 the DWP, as has been mentioned, imposed a cap on Access to Work awards, and Joanna is worried that the cap will act as a glass ceiling on deaf colleagues' and friends' career aspirations. Those with hearing loss will not be able to apply for promotions or look to develop their career, because the Access to Work support will not be sufficient. That means that they will be able to book interpreters for perhaps only three days a week. What will happen on the other two days? Deaf professionals are left at a disadvantage, experiencing stress and frustration as it leads to their being removed from viable career paths. The consequences can be reduction of their working hours and in some cases complete removal from employment. There are self-employed deaf professionals in the arts who have not been able to develop projects, because of lack of access. Research done by the group DeafATW with people whose awards have been capped already or are due to be capped next year, shows a negative impact on careers and aspiration. Especially affected are deaf people who are in or who aspire to professional, managerial or leadership roles, or those who are self-employed and who run their own business.

Another of my constituents, Andrew, is deaf. He uses British Sign Language and works as a senior team administrator with Surrey County Council. Access to

[Teresa Pearce]

Work pays for the interpreters and note-taking that make it possible for him to communicate with colleagues, customers and others, and help him to participate more fully and equally at work, even though it does not stretch to providing assistance at longer meetings where it is impossible to focus on the interpreter and to take notes at the same time. That said, it is likely that the support that Andrew gets via Access to Work, which we all agree is a fantastic system, is much more than what would be seen as a reasonable adjustment for his employer to make. Access to Work has revolutionised the career opportunities for people like Andrew, and shattered the glass ceiling that previously often limited people to doing manual jobs. It has ensured progression for deaf people that is based on talent, which is as things should be. There are now deaf chief executives, deaf intermediaries working at the Ministry of Justice, deaf theatre directors, deaf social workers and a deaf senior team administrator at Surrey County Council. I am concerned that a new policy will undo that good work.

In September DeafATW ran a survey among deaf people about Access to Work. Among those who will be subject to the Access to Work cap from 2018, nearly half said they would not apply for promotion in future, because they were worried that in a new job they would not have enough communication support as a result of the cap. For the same reason, a fifth said that they had already had opportunities to apply for promotion, but had not done so. Nearly half said that they would stay with their current employer as long as possible, because they were worried about what a new employer might think about the effect of the cap on their ability to do their job. When talking about growth we hear a lot about the “productivity puzzle”. It is not much of a puzzle really if we are limiting where people’s talent can take them with such a cut.

In about a third of cases, the employer was either taking or thinking about taking action to check whether the individual could still do their job properly. Deaf people fear that having a capped award means that they will not be able to do their job properly, and employers are concerned about it too. As a consequence, deaf people, whether they are already subject to a cap, are expecting to be subject to one in 2018, or are without a cap in their current work, have said that they are already avoiding applying to work in professional, managerial and senior roles.

In 2015, the Government were clear that a key challenge in administering Access to Work was managing a demand-led programme within a defined budget. They said

“We must achieve a balance between meeting customer need and achieving value for money for the taxpayer. It has been a long-standing aspiration of the programme to support more disabled people into work, so we must address the challenge of supporting this growth whilst keeping Access to Work affordable”.

I would say that it is money well spent. I could not find more recent figures, but the Sayce report in 2011 said that for every pound spent £1.48 came back to the Treasury. That is clearly a case of spending to save.

The Minister may be aware that in July 2015 the Government responded to the Work and Pensions Committee report entitled “Improving Access to Work for disabled people”. The report was scathing about the statistics, stating:

“This lack of transparency is unacceptable. We recommend that DWP change its approach to Access to Work statistics and that, as a minimum, it regularly publish the following information: an indicative annual budget; annual expenditure outturns, broken down by support element and impairment type (including autism spectrum disorders); the number of service users by size of employer; and employers’ mandatory and voluntary financial contributions, broken down by size of employer.”

In their response, the Government admitted that there was work to do to meet those requirements. Will the Minister now, or perhaps by writing to me, update us on progress with the Access to Work statistics? The previous Minister said that there were a lot of statistics available, so I should be pleased to know what progress has been made in supplying the information. Will the Minister also provide figures to show the trend in the number of deaf people supported by Access to Work prior to the introduction of the cap, and afterwards?

The Select Committee also highlighted a particularly strong case for the DWP to improve the accessibility of its disability-related services, recommending that it introduce a video relay system to enable deaf BSL users to contact the Department more easily. Has there been any progress on that? By way of a reminder, I noticed when I arrived that there is a signer for the debate, and I recalled that when the Work and Pensions Committee undertook a review of Access to Work in 2015, we had a sitting when deaf people came to give evidence, and there were deaf people in the Public Gallery, and no one had thought to book a signer. Luckily, one of my constituents had come to watch. He was a qualified signer, and he took over and helped us. In this place, sometimes we do things very well and sometimes we overlook things. If a Work and Pensions Committee looking into accessibility for deaf people did not think to have a signer, it goes to show that we must do better on this. Today’s debate is a step forward.

3.20 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Buck.

I am sure most of us know many people who are affected to some degree by hearing loss, and we know the impact it has on their lives. In my own case, both my parents were affected. My dad, who died a couple of years ago, had industrial deafness caused by his work in a factory. The effects of that lasted a long time. I welcome the comments from the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), recognising the industrial injuries aspect. My mum resisted hearing aids for many years, but the difference they made to her life when she finally gave in was, and continues to be, immense. It is immense to us as well, of course.

That is why I was so concerned to hear from Action on Hearing Loss, which I met recently, that some clinical commissioning groups are proposing restrictions on the prescription of hearing aids to people with mild and moderate hearing loss. Indeed, some have already done so, including North Staffordshire CCG, which was referred to earlier. Not only do hearing aids make a real difference to people with mild and moderate hearing loss, but research shows that they reduce social isolation and depression. New evidence also suggests they can reduce the risk of developing dementia; a study in *The Lancet* recognised hearing loss as potentially the largest modifiable risk factor for dementia. We can do something about it. I hope the Minister will make clear that hearing aids must be provided where they are needed.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) has clearly set out, the cash limit on the Access to Work scheme has also had a significant impact on many people with hearing loss, limiting their ability to do their job properly, or in some cases meaning that they might not be offered jobs because of the shortfall in financial support. I ask the Government to look again at removing or raising the cap. I also echo my hon. Friend's call for further work on implementation of the action plan on hearing loss. As he described, some good work has been done already, but I ask the Minister to ensure that the Government step up their work on implementing the plan.

In the summer, I met Erin, a young woman campaigning with the National Deaf Children's Society to have British Sign Language recognised as a GCSE and made available to all students. I join Erin, and the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), in calling for BSL to be a GCSE subject.

3.22 pm

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Ms Buck. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for securing this debate. This is one of those occasions when the only suitable ministerial and departmental response to the words spoken in the debate is urgent action to review, reconsider and change course. That means helping deaf people, working across Government instead of in silos, and putting deaf people at the centre of the decision-making process. I include an important area that people have talked about quite a lot today: the Department for Work and Pensions, where Access to Work needs to be promoted, not capped. Unfortunately, that cap will affect so many of our deaf and hard of hearing constituents when we come to the end of the grace period in April 2018.

I am the eldest child of deaf parents, and I was their voice and ears from a very young age. That was invaluable to them, enabling them to be easily heard and understood in a hearing world. My dad was born deaf and my mum became deaf at four years of age. I say that I was kidnapped by the deaf community at birth, because my culture, language and community are theirs. That poses me some difficulties on occasion, because I can be very straightforward in the way I deal with matters. My first language is BSL, not Sign Supported English—most people think that is BSL, but it is not.

I was tempted to sign my whole speech. I was going to do that and have the interpreters voice over my comments for my colleagues, to give everybody a feel for how it is not to be able to communicate directly—not for a minute, not for a sentence, but for five minutes or however long it takes me to finish this speech. Not to be able to communicate directly with the person we are talking to is really, really strange and difficult. Deaf people feel and experience that every single minute of their lives.

My experiences and the communication difficulties I saw led me, when I was Lord Mayor, to provide every deaf person in Liverpool with a minicom. We paid for them by getting children in schools to learn the deaf alphabet. They saw it as a secret language and really enjoyed it, and I got minicomms for everybody who was deaf in Liverpool. Some might ask why that was so important. We talk about isolation, but even though I thought, as a product of that environment, that I

understood it, I came home with a minicom for my dad and gave it to him. He looked at it and was so happy, and then he took it and pressed “Nine... nine...” I said, “Whoa!” and he said, “Who else can I call? Nobody else has got one, only the emergency services and the doctor.” I thought, “Right, I get the message: every deaf person in Liverpool needs one.” That made me realise that I needed to get on with it and get everybody a minicom.

Mobile phones have improved the situation, but as the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) has outlined, we are not progressing with transmission services as we should. I have known Chris Jones for many years, and it is a really important thing, but the agenda is so large that we need Ministers across Government to start tackling it quickly. Being able to communicate is fundamental to someone doing their job and doing a good job. The evidence is clear that Access to Work is a system that enables deaf people, particularly those who use BSL, to use their own voices in the workplace, with the communication support they need.

When I think about it, I am probably one of the first examples. My dad was a plasterer and he was so good—I genuinely mean that—that directors of building companies, since they could not phone him, used to come to my house and sit down around the table. As a child, from the age of eight or nine onwards, I used to sit on a Friday night and instead of all the millions of bits of paper going back and forth, I was drafted in to be the person from Access to Work. My dad did really well. He kept getting more and more money. They wanted him, the prices went up, and I did that every few months.

To me, the evidence is clear: the cap does not simply hinder deaf people's ability to do their jobs, but will cause them to turn down employment offers and promotions. It might have meant that my dad did not get such a good deal on his next contract. It leaves self-employed people in a precarious position, where the small profits they have worked hard to earn go toward expensive interpretation costs. That is absolutely not a cost-effective way to work. The UK Council on Deafness found that nearly half of those whose income will be capped in April said that they would not even apply for promotion in future because they worried that they would not receive enough communication support. That presents barriers to those aspiring to careers in professional, managerial and senior roles. I have a friend who was the headteacher of a deaf school. Without support, how will that happen in the future?

We need to allow deaf people to progress as far as their talent allows. I have spoken to many other deaf people in lower roles but who aspire to do better. They have stopped looking forward and now live every day in fear that they may lose the job they have. Every day is a challenge, especially if they lose that support for two days a week. We must all be clear that deafness is not a limiting learning disability. There is no reason why deaf people cannot secure employment in senior roles, so long as Government decisions do not dampen down the support that they require.

Central Government just cannot sit back in the hope that employers and the self-employed will simply make up that two-day deficit in support costs that the cap is estimated to impose, especially when employers are already saying that they are not confident about their businesses employing a person with a hearing loss. We simply cannot waste huge swathes of talent. I know

[Rosie Cooper]

that, because my dad, who was born deaf, was probably one of the greatest men I have ever known. He was fantastically clever, and he was deaf, but that did not prevent him from doing anything—and we should not allow it to.

Does the Minister accept that the cap reimposes limits on the ambitions and financial security of deaf people, and leaves the next generation without the belief or ability to succeed in a 21st century workplace? They can. My dad has died now—he was 91—but he did it before; he was a trailblazer. Do not stop the new trailblazers. Help them to forge ahead.

It is also vital that the Minister recognises that, outside this place, the majority of British citizens and employers lack awareness of Access to Work. That really helps to explain why a recent labour force survey found that 30% of working-age people who identify themselves as having a hearing loss are not employed; I actually believe the proportion is higher than that. Does he recognise the need for a single gateway that would provide assistance and advice for employers seeking Access to Work support for their employees who are deaf or have a hearing loss?

I have listened to people refer to deafness as an invisible handicap, and it absolutely is; it is an invisible disability. However, that also means it is an easy target for cuts, especially in the NHS, Education and the DWP. We must guard against taking that easy, quick solution in the hope that deaf people and the hard of hearing will not be able to articulate the anger they feel at their treatment. I have two hearing aids, and I ask the Minister: if my hearing deteriorated to such an extent that I needed communication support to do my job as an MP, would these rules enable me to do the job effectively? If not, how is everybody else supposed to do their jobs under these rules? Do the rules not jeopardise employment, rather than helping to increase it within the deaf and hard of hearing community?

On a slightly different subject, as I said before, my first language was sign language, and I was delighted that the Labour party general election manifesto earlier this year committed to giving BSL full legal recognition. That would improve the structures and the expectation of full language access, through fully qualified interpreters, in all aspects of public life. However, that leads to a question: if the Government do not value interpreters, how will that encourage people to take up those roles?

What will we do if people do not learn BSL and are not there as interpreters? We already have cases of unqualified people interpreting in courts. That is wrong. They have no idea about deaf culture or the nuances and what people really mean. There is a difference between somebody who is just learning sign language and somebody who is really fluent or speaks it as a first language and understands what a deaf person is really saying. We need to value those interpreters.

My final question to the Minister is: does he agree that legal recognition will provide another means of improving awareness of deafness and of the barriers that deaf people and those with hearing loss deal with in the workplace? We need to ensure that Access to Work is extended to many more employers than the current minuscule few who actually use it. I look forward to hearing the Minister's reply. Ultimately, he will be

judged on the ability of the deaf community and those with hearing loss to succeed and to realise their potentials. That means in every part of their lives—particularly in the workplace, education and health, because without those things, what are we to do? Please give them the same chances that we get.

3.35 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck, and to take part in this important debate secured by the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). It has been a consensual debate across the Chamber, which is extremely welcome.

This will be the first time that my words have ever been signed, as well as it being the first time in a parliamentary debate; I certainly hope it becomes a regular feature in Parliament. It would be nice if the signing was on the live feed, not only on the re-broadcast. I do not know whose remit that is in—perhaps the parliamentary authorities or the Administration Committee could discuss it further with the broadcasters to see how best we can implement that. Again, I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate; it is a tremendous first. I echo the calls from the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) that providing sign language interpretation should become a regular feature.

Various Members have discussed the multiplicity of Departments responsible for this sphere. If that is not simplified, there certainly seems to be a need for there to be, at the very least, a clear, identified lead Department. That may be an easier route. We have heard of the many day-to-day difficulties experienced by those who are hard of hearing—one person in six is affected, and they are less likely to be in employment. On the one hand, it is welcome news that technology is making it easier for people suffering from deafness to work, while, on the other, it is worrying that the cap on Access to Work support has disproportionately impacted on those with hearing loss. That point has been well made and I do not need to emphasise it further; the cost-benefit ratio of £1 spent to £1.48 received says it all, in financial terms.

Various Members have given their personal stories and accounts, such as the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst). I am also grateful to the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) for the case he identified, which put a very human dimension on to the issue. I cannot imagine what it would be like to not hear family or listen to music; I have no comprehension of how awful that would be. However, there are ways that we can help people, and we should do everything we can to ensure a better quality of life for everyone. Indeed, that is effectively the challenge of today: to ensure that deaf people can be fully involved in daily and public life as active, healthy citizens who can make informed choices about every aspect of their own lives.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) covered much of what happens in Scotland, but I will mention a few of the points again. The Scottish Government have a British Sign Language national plan, which, as has been said, aims to make Scotland the best place in the world for BSL users to live, work and visit. It seems to be a regular feature

in debates that I am always telling people to visit my constituency, so I might as well emphasise this again: it is a great place, and if hon. Members have not been, they should come.

The British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 requires public bodies in Scotland to publish plans for how they will promote and support BSL every six years. The first national plan covers the Scottish Government, and other public bodies, including councils, NHS boards, colleges and universities, will publish plans next year. The national plan, which runs from 2017-23, is the first of its kind in the UK and sets out 10 long-term goals for BSL in Scotland, covering early years and education, training and work, health, mental health and wellbeing, transport, culture and the arts, justice and democracy. It describes 70 actions Scottish Ministers will take by 2020, whereafter a progress report shall be published and a further set of actions for delivery by 2023 will be identified. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East mentioned several of those key actions, so I will not repeat them.

However, I can think of a 71st action that might feed into the next round for the Scottish Government and might be one we should take forward in this Parliament, and that is what we as individual elected Members do to facilitate that. In preparing for the debate, I thought about what we do on home visits and for people visiting our constituency offices. There are a number of issues, and we may need parliamentary guidance on how best to service all our constituents with their inquiries.

In Scotland, a lot of it is about attitude, but our plan is also backed up by money: £1.3 million has been put in to support it. That is not a grand amount, but it is enough to do a fair amount of work. Dr Terry Riley, chair of the British Deaf Association, said that the Scottish Government's national plan is

“a brilliant example for the rest of the United Kingdom to follow.”

I hope that Ministers will have a look at what we are doing in Scotland. I have a copy of the plan here, if anyone wants it. I am not hard of hearing, but I am poor of vision, and I am pleased to say that the plan is in quite large print, so it suits the likes of myself to a tee.

It is not just through the BSL national plan that the Scottish Government are taking action to help. The disability delivery plan is another way that we can help by removing barriers and promoting independent living, with a key target being a reduction in the employment gap between disabled people and the rest of the population. It has been highlighted today that deaf people are not in as great an employment position as other members of society.

The Scotland Act 2016 devolved a number of powers to set up employment schemes to assist those at risk of becoming long-term unemployed and to help disabled people into work, including schemes that seek to help employers to find suitable employees. As a result, Fair Start Scotland will operate from 2018 for three years, with the aim of helping a minimum of 38,000 people into work. I hope that a number of those will be deaf people and those who are hard of hearing.

At a UK level, more needs to be done to address the gender, race and disability pay gap and tackle pay inequality and occupational segregation. To that end, I support extension of pay gap reporting to cover gender,

race and disability. I am keen to hear the Minister's thoughts on that. Better and more statistics could help us greatly in this cause.

I would also like to hear from the Minister on EU law, which has played a huge role in upholding the rights of disabled people. Those rights must be protected post-Brexit. There are many examples, but of particular importance to the deaf community are the employment equality directive of 2000 and the public sector websites and mobile applications directive of 2016, which requires public sector bodies to ensure that their websites and mobile apps comply with accessibility standards so that they can be used by disabled people.

As well as protecting existing EU measures, it is important to ensure that the UK is not left behind. For example, the European Accessibility Act is being negotiated at an EU level. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has said that the Act will benefit disabled people by providing common rules on accessibility in relation to computers and operating systems, ATMs, ticketing and check-in machines, smartphones, TV equipment related to digital television services, telephony services and related equipment. It would be great to know what the UK proposals are for those areas in the future. It would be tremendous if the Minister looked into that.

There is much we can learn from different countries. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and I have mentioned what is happening in Scotland, and the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South mentioned some of the things happening in Australia. There is a lot we can learn, and I look forward to hearing the other winding-up speeches and seeing this go further forward.

3.43 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for bringing this important subject to our attention.

I begin by saying how delighted I am to see that we have a signer in the room. It must be really easy for us to extend that service across the business of the House—that would be a really quick win, I think we all agree.

It is a real privilege to respond to the debate on behalf of the Opposition. I have been genuinely moved by some of the powerful and personal speeches we have heard today. They prepared me far better for my contribution than the research I did ahead of the debate. We can look at the statistics, such as the fact that 11 million people in the UK are living with deafness, but we have heard today about the extent of it. The hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) courageously shared a very personal story and enriched the debate. We thank her for that. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) talked movingly of his constituent. We heard about a family having to raise £44,000 to let a little four-year-old boy have a chance in life.

I think we all agree that we must do more. The best thing about the debate is that it has raised awareness of a massive issue. We are talking about deafness and hearing loss, people who were born deaf and people who become deaf, sometimes through illness and sometimes through the ageing process, and how are we going to support them all, beginning with the children. The fact

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that only a third of screening processes for newborn babies are up to standard and accredited is of great concern. That needs to be addressed, and soon

Bearing in mind that 50,000 children in the UK are deaf, we must serve them well and make sure they are not isolated. We must make sure that their isolation does not begin with being isolated from their parents. The majority—90%—of children born deaf are born to hearing parents. If their parents are not supported, there are implications for the child's language development. We know there are ways of providing support, such as radio aids, and we must make that available to parents and support them. We hear a lot in the House about early intervention for all children to address all issues in the early years, and there can be no more important an issue to address than this.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) stressed powerfully that deaf children and deaf adults do not have learning disabilities. Our education system must address this. It cannot be right that deaf children are 42% less likely to get five decent GCSEs. We are hindering their progress for life at that early stage. I was alarmed to learn that since 2011, the number of specialist teachers for the deaf has reduced by 12%. That cannot be the right way forward.

Members have rightly stressed the importance of British Sign Language. I have to admit, I never realised until this week—I never thought it through, and I am sure I am not the only one—that British Sign Language is some people's first language. I thought of it as something separate that helped, but this debate has increased my awareness. The more this is talked about, the better. It is vital that BSL is taken seriously and given recognition. The UK is a signatory to the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, but we must do more and give this language the equal validation it deserves. Why can British Sign Language not be a GCSE subject? I know this is beyond the remit of the Minister and his Department, but I am sure he will pass it on to his colleagues in the Department for Education. If BSL were a GCSE subject, people would take it seriously, more people would learn it and there would be more access to it, and therefore deaf people would be able to participate more fully.

Members have rightly mentioned the human cost as well as the financial cost of isolation not being addressed. The health statistics are quite clear—for example, on the number of people who retire early or suffer from anxiety and depression because they can no longer cope in the world of work. As has been mentioned, many elderly people who lose their hearing lose their social circle and cannot communicate with family. There is the cost of not supporting them with hearing aids and, as the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) mentioned, with a telecommunications relay service. We should be looking into such systems to maximise inclusion for old people.

The world of work is obviously a massive issue. The Access to Work scheme is absolutely brilliant. It is shocking that it is probably the DWP's best kept secret. I recently hosted a Disability Confident employers event, and many of the employers admitted that they had not known about the scheme at all. There are two aspects to the world of work when it comes to deafness. The person

who is deaf or hard of hearing needs support to cope at work, and the employer—in particular, the small or medium-sized employer—needs support to understand that that need not disadvantage their business. As has rightly been mentioned—I think my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East said this—when a disabled person is employed and supported in their workplace, it reduces workforce churn. The support does not have to be expensive. Sometimes it is about awareness, moving someone's seat so that they can lip-read, or letting them sit in a quiet corner of the office where background noise is not such an issue for them.

The message from the Government about Disability Confident employers is very strong and very useful, but now, with the capping of Access to Work support, they seem to be sending a contradictory message. Can we afford not to support people in work? What is the cost of not supporting them? What a loss of talent. As we have said, this debate covers many areas and not just one Department, but not least is the Department responsible for economic development, because what is the cost to our economy of not utilising and maximising the potential of all our citizens, including people who are deaf or hard of hearing?

What can we do? What concrete action can we take? The recommendations in the 2015 action plan were very welcome. I think there is agreement on both sides of the House that that is a sensible plan, so let us see it put into action. The "What Works" guides published this year were an excellent piece of work that we need to build on. Concrete action is needed at every stage. We need to ensure that newborn babies are properly screened and that the screening is always of high quality. We need to support parents of deaf children with early intervention. We need to support schools and ensure that there are specialist teachers and that children are not allowed to feel like second-class citizens. We need to promote British Sign Language in schools and allow it to become a GCSE subject. We should look to the Scottish example—an excellent job is obviously being done there. As someone who is half-Scottish, I say, "If the Scots can do it, so can we," and I am sure we will do it at least as well.

We must ensure that equipment is enhanced and not restricted. I was shocked to hear of clinical commissioning groups that are beginning to restrict the provision of hearing aids. The criteria for cochlear implants must be reviewed. We must look to aid people's hearing and support them to live full lives, rather than looking for ways to limit them. We have to go back and review those criteria.

Let us invest in unlocking the potential of the deaf and the hard of hearing. Our economy depends on the talents of all our people. The cost of not acting not only causes misery for individuals who are discriminated against and excluded from society and the world of work, but stores up for the future huge costs for our health, support services and, of course, our economy. The failure to support deaf people to fulfil their potential is costing the economy. We cannot afford not to act.

3.55 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): I thank all hon. Members very much for their contributions. There are many ways I could spend a Thursday afternoon, but I have really enjoyed this

debate and I have learned a lot. This has been a consensual debate, and I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper), for the excellent tone of her comments. I really enjoyed what she had to say as well.

Like everyone else, I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing the debate through the Backbench Business Committee, and also our signers. Thank you for doing what is a first and for working so hard. I cannot sign, but I can imagine that it is quite hard work to do it for three hours. There are two signers and they have worked really hard. Thank you for that.

I do not have a hearing problem, but I do have a sight problem, which is why I have a lectern in front of me. The papers are far too far away from me without it, which is why I always put it into play.

I thank the all-party parliamentary group on deafness, a number of whose members have spoken today, for all the work that it does in the House in raising awareness and improving the way we provide support. I cannot remember in my time in the House a debate on this subject, so it was certainly long overdue. All-party groups can do this; the Backbench Business Committee is excellent.

As we have heard, hearing loss is widespread, affecting one in six of the UK population, and it has a massive impact on the lives of our constituents and, indeed, some Members of the House. We have heard today really incredible contributions and—I agree with the hon. Member for Burnley—really moving contributions, especially from the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper). There was not a dry eye in the House when she was speaking—thank you for the way you put things. I was going to intervene to give her a chance to have a drink, but she was brilliant in the way she put things. I thank her for that.

I shall highlight the key steps that the Government are taking to support those with hearing loss and deafness and then move on to the other important points raised by hon. Members during the debate. I apologise in advance in case I do not cover them all; I will write to hon. Members about any points that are not covered.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse, in March 2015 the Department of Health and NHS England published “Action Plan on Hearing Loss”. That is a statement of intent for action across the health and care sector. There is an ongoing programme of work that the action plan has initiated. There are 20 separate outcome measures, which the hon. Gentleman touched on.

In September 2017—working with the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Education and hearing loss charities—NHS England issued a series of “What Works” guides, providing examples of what we know works in supporting individuals with hearing loss throughout their lives. Those guides, aimed at organisations, providers and commissioners, cover hearing loss and employment, the transition to adulthood for young people with hearing loss, and hearing loss and healthy ageing.

A key point in the plan is the need for clear guidance for commissioners, and in July 2016 NHS England published “Commissioning Services for People with Hearing Loss: A framework for clinical commissioning

groups”—snappy titles we do not do in the NHS, as I have learned since arriving there as a Minister. As the Minister responsible for public health, I am very pleased that that framework recognises hearing loss as a “major public health challenge”, because that is exactly what it is. The framework is a major step forward in focusing local commissioners on tackling uncorrected hearing loss and on addressing the variation in access to and the quality of services across the country.

The framework has been developed with a range of stakeholders, including voluntary sector groups and professional representative groups, such as Action on Hearing Loss, which has been mentioned today, and the British Tinnitus Association—ditto—which are members of the Hearing Loss and Deafness Alliance. The guidance is crucial in ensuring consistency across CCG commissioning in England and supporting commissioners as they make decisions on what is effective and good value for their local populations. In turn, it will help to reduce inequalities in access to and outcomes from hearing services. I recognise the need for us to maintain momentum and to ensure that the action plan secures positive outcomes for those with hearing loss and deafness.

Let me turn to the points—all of them, I hope—that have been raised. In response to the speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), who I know had to run away—he is my former boss—I say this: not only am I not the Minister for Education, DWP, DCMS or others; I am not even the Minister within the Department of Health covering this area, but never let that stop a happy Minister.

I really enjoyed listening to the debate. The smartest way to respond will be to take the points that have been raised the most. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse, in opening the debate; the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who mentioned her constituent; my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead and pretty much all other speakers mentioned the Access to Work scheme. I recognise hon. Members’ concerns about the impact of changes to Access to Work. I understand that the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse will meet with the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work early in the new year to discuss in more detail Access to Work and concerns he has about it.

Members will realise that I am not that Minister, who is my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), but I spoke to her at lunch time ahead of this debate and I was on the Front Bench with her this afternoon for the statement on the new Command Paper. We will speak after this debate to ensure that she is fully up to date with everything raised that comes within her portfolio.

I think it is worth putting it on record that resources for Access to Work were increased in real terms in the 2015 spending review. I appreciate that hon. Members have all spoken positively about Access to Work as a scheme, but resources within a publicly-funded health service are still finite and they need to be allocated to the growing numbers coming to the scheme—8% more people had Access to Work provision approved last year than the previous year, including 13% more deaf people. Last year, we spent £104 million on Access to Work grants, an increase from £97 million the year before. As has been said by a number of hon. Members, Access to Work is a demand-led scheme and therefore the number

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and level of awards will reflect that. We intend for it to continue to meet demand, and with that the numbers continue to go up.

I do not accept that the maximum level of support is too low. The help an individual may receive from Access to Work depends on their individual needs and their personal circumstances—up to the current maximum of £42,100 per year rising to £43,100 from April 2018. That is 1.5 times the average salary, which is far more than most of my constituents, and those of every hon. Member here, earn.

Transitional arrangements are in place for existing recipients and those who made a claim before October 2015. The changes do not apply until April 2018, provided that needs remain the same. People will receive annual reviews of their progress and support in the transition to the award level. The Government continually monitor the application of the cap and consider whether any further flexibilities might be required. That is another point I discussed with my hon. Friend before the debate; she is acutely aware of the situation.

It is not often that a Minister is able to stand up in a Westminster Hall debate on the day that something new has been announced and touch on something new. This Command Paper “Improving Lives: The Future of Work, Health and Disability” sets out our response to last year’s Green Paper consultation. In this document—a weighty tome that hon. Members and I will want to study—we set out how those users with the greatest needs, such as some British Sign Language users, will be offered new managed personal budgets, as well as workplace assessments involving their employers, to help to meet their needs within their award level. Deaf customers will also be supported by a dedicated team of special advisers.

The hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) had to get away, but he has returned. He is indeed a friend from the grand old days of the coalition, as he put it. I have noted his incredibly well-made point about SMEs. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead made the point that those employing disabled people get a lower churn and a number of hon. Members reflected that message in their comments. I think it is absolutely right. A company based in my constituency called Microlink PC was mentioned in the Chamber during the statement. It works with large and small organisations—big banks in the City and small SMEs across the country—and the focus of its business is to use technology to help disabled people into work. That absolutely includes people with deafness and hearing loss. Many people across the charities sector also work to help that to happen.

I saw the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse during the statement earlier, standing on the back row, and I knew exactly what he was going to say, and he did not disappoint when he raised the issue of the cap. All I can say is that I wrote on my notes the comments of the Secretary of State—which I know the hon. Gentleman will have noted, too—and that I know the hon. Gentleman will bring the matter up with my hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work when he meets her. The Secretary of State said he would continue to review, continue to look at the evidence. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to press on that and to continue to look at the evidence, because he has that there in black and white from the Secretary of State.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned—as did the hon. Member for Eastbourne and the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), who has also gone, and many other hon. Members—the legal recognition of British Sign Language and the case for a BSL GCSE. It is not entirely clear to me which Department would lead on legal recognition of British Sign Language, which is the problem that so many people have referred to today. I am sympathetic to the calls for strengthening the role of British Sign Language. We want to see as many people trained and providing support as possible. At this time, Her Majesty’s Government are not yet convinced that the way to achieve that is through legislation. The Department for Work and Pensions undertook an extensive market review, of which the final report was published in July, which demonstrated that communication requirements should be addressed on an individual basis and that there is no universal approach to addressing these needs.

We have protections of the legal rights of people who are deaf in the Equality Act 2010 and in the duties of the NHS—the mandate that I am responsible for giving to NHS England and publicly funded social care organisations—to conform to what we call the accessible information standard. I am happy to take that point away. It came across clearly from many hon. Members in this debate. All I will say is that the private Members’ ballot is a wonderful thing.

On the subject of the GCSE, any change to the school curriculum, particularly the establishment of new GCSEs, is a matter for the Department for Education and something that the all-party group will have to take up with it. I know from talking to the Department before the debate—I suspected that this would come up—that there are no plans at this time to introduce further GCSEs beyond those to which the Government have already committed, but something tells me that the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead, the hon. Member for Eastbourne and other hon. Members who have spoken today will, with their usual determination, follow this through with Ministers at the Department for Education, who will no doubt note their comments today.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse and the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) talked about the assessment criteria for cochlear implants. Those were debated in March when the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse had an Adjournment debate in which he highlighted the report of the Ear Foundation and he called for NICE to review its cochlear implants technology appraisal. As the hon. Gentleman will know, NICE is an independent and expert body that advises us at the Department, and it has discretion to review its guidance in the light of any new evidence.

NICE is working on a list review for this particular technology appraisal and will consult with stakeholders in 2018, so I will make sure that he and all other hon. Members who have raised this matter get early sight of that and do not have to go looking for it or hear about it in the media. I am absolutely sure that this will include consideration of thresholds and criteria for getting cochlear implants. I understand that NICE is planning this consultation because of its recognition of how important this is, going beyond the usual review process. Although that does not give the hon. Gentleman the clarity he wants, I hope it is helpful to him in some way.

The hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart)—who spoke excellently about this—talked about the provision of functionally equivalent telecoms services and video-text relay services. Obviously telecommunications does not sit within the Department of Health—no matter how big our remit, I do not think we have that one—but it is very good to hear that companies such as 3 and deafPLUS are at the forefront of delivering equivalent services for their hard-of-hearing customers. I wish deafPLUS all the best in the Helpline awards, which it has been nominated for. I understand that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has previously considered the issue of provision of telecoms services, despite it being a commercial decision for the public-facing companies. This has included the Department engaging with companies and industry, and Ministers writing to the FTSE 100 companies seeking views. I hear that the feedback from that included the view that there were better means of meeting the needs of consumers with less reliance on video relay services. I am happy to raise the issues highlighted by Members with DCMS colleagues and see what further engagement there can be, and will of course recommend that they look at the Australia example that my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South spoke about in such glowing terms.

The Member leading the debate, the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse, raised the Deaflympics. I understand that the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), has instructed officials in her Department to look into how we can ensure greater recognition for the Deaflympics in this country, and she will consider their advice in due course. She is a very accessible Minister, and I know the hon. Gentleman knows her and will no doubt take that matter up with her as well.

A number of people, including the hon. Gentleman, my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and the hon. Member for Bristol East talked about improving paediatric audiology services through the Improving Quality in Physiological Services—IQIPS—scheme. Concerns have indeed been raised in relation to accreditation of paediatric audiology services. The independent process of accreditation—the IQIPS services—is there to ensure all providers meet a common standard. We want all providers to have completed accreditation as quickly as possible. The commissioning framework encourages clinical commissioning groups to require providers to have completed the IQIPS self-assessment tool, and to have applied for and achieved accreditation, within the duration of their contract. Commissioners must be the ones who drive this forward. For us, the accreditation process is an effective means of testing against the standard. If during an assessment mandatory findings are raised that show nonconformity with any part of the standard, the service agrees appropriate improvement actions with the United Kingdom Accreditation Service team to rectify that and prevent it reoccurring.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse and many others raised the issue, which I even question myself on, of which Government Department leads on British Sign Language. I completely appreciate the frustration. There can only ever be one Minister at the Box, but what we really need is a triumvirate of me merged into my hon. Friends the Members for Truro

and Falmouth, and for Chatham and Aylesford—that would be an interesting sight! I totally appreciate the frustration with the fact that no single Department leads on British Sign Language. I suppose, although this will probably just make it worse, it would depend on the context; if it is in education, that would be for the Department for Education; if it was how BSL is used in health settings in line with the accessibility standard that I mentioned, that would be for my colleagues in the Department of Health. I get the hon. Gentleman's point, and will take it away.

The hon. Member for Eastbourne, whom I know well and is welcome back to the House, talked about screening for hearing loss in adults. He made the point very well that we do not focus just on people with complete hearing loss. He said to me the other day that he feared the debate would be about the deaf-deaf, as he put it, and he wants to ensure that people with partial hearing loss get the support they need. He made the point very well that people begin to lose their hearing later in life, as age catches up with us all, but accept it as part of the natural ageing process. They are often reluctant to admit they have a hearing problem, do not seek support as promptly as they might with other conditions and, as we have heard and as he said, often wait years before going for a hearing test. We heard his call for the introduction of a hearing loss screening programme for people at the age of 66, once they reach retirement, and as part of the NHS health check for people aged 40 to 70. I am responsible for the health check programme.

The advice from the UK National Screening Committee, the expert group that advises Ministers on all aspects of screening, is that the evidence does not demonstrate that universal screening would provide any hearing-related improvement in quality of life in comparison to hearing loss identified through other channels. However, the hon. Gentleman makes a persuasive argument that we can do more to identify hearing loss as people reach older age. He said that the general election had intervened, but as he also said, he is back, and I do not doubt that I will be hearing from him again on this subject, probably at Health questions in a couple of weeks' time. I will be more than happy to do so, to be honest. He also mentioned that CCGs commission the audiology services. NHS England's commissioning framework captures the importance of audiology, and monthly waiting time data for audiology is collected and can and should be used by Members and the public to hold commissioners to account.

I touched on my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney, who spoke about support for children with hearing loss, and about his constituent's son, Daniel. I was the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on autism for many years when I was on the Back Benches, and we often used to hear about the so-called middle-class parents with sharp elbows who managed to get their children what they needed. That is, of course, human nature; but it should not be the sharp elbows of the middle classes or of anybody else that gets children what they need—that is what the state is for, in my opinion.

Children with a special educational need as a result of their deafness will benefit from the more integrated approach to meeting their needs. Since 2014, a new framework has required CCGs and local authorities to make joint arrangements for assessing the range of

[*Steve Brine*]

eligible children's needs, and the development of what my hon. Friend rightly referred to as the education, health and care plans to provide necessary support. Every Member in this debate and in this House has casework on EHCPs. These arrangements are transforming the support available to children and young people by joining up services for zero to 25-year-olds—that is their scope—across education, health and social care and by focusing on positive outcomes. He is right to take up the casework, as I would myself. I think the performance of local authorities is vastly different across the country. I know from speaking to him outside this debate that he is working very closely with his local authority, as I would expect, and that he has been impressed by the improvements it has made. I do not doubt that that is because of the pressure that he has put on it.

In my hon. Friend's speech he used the term, which I wrote down, "The right support right from the start". I do not think that was an accident, because as a Member of Parliament I had an invitation today, as we all did, from the National Deaf Children's Society, which he referred to, requesting the pleasure of my company at an event called: "Technology and deaf children: Getting the right support, right from the start". Mr Speaker has very kindly allowed that to be in the state rooms in Speaker's House at lunchtime on 10 January. I think that will be an excellent event, and I hope it is well attended; I suspect it will be by all Members in this room.

My hon. Friend touched on special educational needs funding as well. The implementation of the new SEN system has been supported by significant new investment. That includes £70 million in '14-15, £113 million in '14 through to '17 in the implementation funding, and £45 million in the same period for independent supporters for families. Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission are reviewing how all local authorities—authorities know about this—and their CCG partners work together to meet the needs of children with SEN as the EHCPs come into force. The assessment criteria are there, and are very much on their shoulders.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) gave a brilliant and very personal speech, if I may say so. It is never easy to do that in this place. It gets lots of retweets, but that is the easy bit; it is really hard to do it. She mentioned her mum's story, and I thought she spoke brilliantly. She used the term invisible disability, which the hon. Member for Burnley also used. My hon. Friend said that deafness could take many different forms and have impacts physical and mental. I thought she made the case really coherently.

To touch again on my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead, my former boss, for the record, I do not mind at all when former Ministers come to debates that I am responding to, especially when they are former Ministers for a Department that I am not responsible for. I thought he made the point very well about the scale of the issue and the hidden deafness in this country, and he gave his example of industrial causes of deafness.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) told us about the BSL Act in Scotland and the ensuing national action plan, which he directed

colleagues to look at. I will direct colleagues in the UK Government to look at that. Hats off to him for his attempt at signing the start of his speech. I thought that was a very brave move, and I thank him for his remarks.

The hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) spoke very well about loneliness. I wonder whether the loneliness commission that our former colleague Jo Cox set up touched on the issue of deafness and its impact on loneliness; I would be interested to learn from those involved whether it did. The hon. Lady spoke about Jacob and the crowdfunding in her constituency for his cochlear implant. I do not know the details of his case, so it would be unfair for me to comment, but it sounds as though her community is showing incredible grace to that little boy. It would be wonderful to see him in the House when he has had his implant. She also raised the issue of the Access to Work cap again. My Department for Work and Pensions colleagues and I will write to her about her specific questions on numbers.

The hon. Member for West Lancashire spoke about her kidnap by the deaf community. Again, hers was a very emotional speech. I so wish she had done what she threatened to do and signed her entire speech, as long as she had given me a copy of it beforehand. I like to think I can cope, but I would not have coped with all of that. I thank her for her well made comments, especially about a single gateway. She is a member of the Health Committee, and I suspect that she is also a member of the all-party group, so perhaps she will make that suggestion to the new Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work and will talk about the cap on Access to Work when the group meets her. The hon. Lady also referred to invisible disability.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) made points about the gender gap and EU law post-Brexit. They definitely do not fall within my remit, but I will write to him. We have the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, or the repeal Bill as it is colloquially known, and in the past week or so, we have had a taste of the issues relating to animal rights. I have to say, as a Government MP and a Government Minister, I take slight umbrage with the suggestion—although not by the hon. Gentleman—that somehow we need the EU to have good rights relating to looking after animals in our country, let alone our citizens. I do not buy that for a minute. We will import that regulation through the Bill and then look at it as a sovereign Parliament and decide how we can improve on it. I am sure there are ways to do that. From what Members have said on the subject in this debate, and given the other Members who are interested, I somehow do not think that the issue will go unheard.

I will leave a few minutes for the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse to sum up. In conclusion, we have had a very interesting, honest debate. I hope I have been able to demonstrate to hon. Members that across my now expanding portfolio, we have a strong framework for supporting people with hearing loss through a set of quality and commissioning criteria—within a restricted budget, of course; that will always be the case. Setting the expectations for commissioners and providers is what we in the Department of Health are most interested in. The dedicated action plan on hearing loss is being spearheaded by NHS England, for which I am responsible, and the multi-agency approach is enshrined in the action plan.

We are doing a lot, but we can always do more. Some really good points have been made in today's debate. Whether more people are watching today's debate than "Pointless", I do not know, but if more people watched debates such as this, they would have a far better opinion of Parliament than some of them do. We have had a really good debate and have covered a huge amount of ground. I very much thank hon. Members for their contributions, which have all been from the heart and incredibly well informed. I look forward to following up on many of the issues that have been raised.

4.23 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful for the opportunity to sum up, Ms Buck. Invariably, the Member who sums up such debates says, "We have had a good discussion." Not only is that the case today, but this has been an exceptional debate, and I thank everybody who has contributed. There has been a personal theme, but even those who did not raise a personal experience clearly have a grasp of the importance of the subject to their constituents. If any hon. Members are not on the all-party group mailing list, they are now, but I suspect everybody already is.

The hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) put his finger on the big issue. As others mentioned, this is a cross-departmental matter, so we need a champion. I will return to that in due course. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) spoke about cochlear implants and NICE. The Minister says that the work is now back in hand; it will be nine months late, but hopefully it is coming.

The hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), as the Minister said, covered her mum's story powerfully, bringing a tear to my eye. If she saw me wiping it, it is because it was such a great explanation of an individual's difficulty, told with clear personal commitment. She made a point about how important it is for organisations such as Auditory Verbal to get to children born deaf within the first three and a half years, when their brains can still learn to speak; after that, it is far too late. That is why the pathway is so important.

The hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) also spoke powerfully about his personal experience. I was not sure whether he was making a bid to come back as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group; he will need to wait for the annual general meeting, but he is a great vice-chairman, and I will be pleased to see him there. The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) both called me their hon. Friend; that does not do me any favours on this side of the House, but I know what it means. We have done a lot of good work on a number of Committees, especially on fire, and we are friends. That tells people outside the House

that although we might not often be in the same Division Lobby, we have friends across the Chamber and we work together when there is a common purpose. That is really important.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) spoke about IQIPS and accreditation. The right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead, with his experience as Minister of State on Access to Work, is a powerful ally. The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), who just left to catch his train, talked about money being available for BSL lessons here. That ought to be the case, and I am sure that it is the case; we just need to explore it. He made a point by signing, reminding me that so much of sign language is common sense, such as "book". He used the sign for "Scotland", which is bagpipes. That tickles me every time I see it. He made a clear point about the power of legislation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) told a story about Jacob and crowdfunding. It was powerful, as was the personal story told by my hon. Friend the Member for Blydon (Liz Twist). My hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) told her stories about having BSL as her first language, and the Access to Work issues. She spoke about Liverpool minicoms, and her dad, of whom she is clearly and rightly very proud. I am sure that it touched everybody in the room.

The politics came from the three Front-Bench speakers; the place went back to normal when they started talking. I mean no disrespect at all; they deal with things from a political point of view. Judging by their speeches, the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) and the Minister clearly understand the issues, and we are grateful for that.

Finally, we need a champion in Government. BSL needs a champion in Government. At some point, a Department or a Secretary of State will have to say to a Minister, "You're the person for the job." Then we can all go support that person and get a better hearing in Government. This has been a powerful debate. I am grateful to both signers for being here—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]—and to the House authorities for facilitating that. I hope that this is the first of many opportunities and becomes the norm. I am grateful for the opportunity to say these few words in closing.

Ms Karen Buck (in the Chair): On behalf of us all, I thank the two signers, Sally Macreavy and Richard Law. We greatly appreciate their work.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered deafness and hearing loss.

4.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 30 November 2017

CABINET OFFICE

Correction

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): During Prime Minister's questions on 29 November 2017, in answer to the question from the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) I should have said that spending on disability is £50 billion.

[HCWS290]

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Improvement: Somerset and Suffolk

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): I am announcing today that having carefully considered all the material and representations I have received, I am "minded to" implement two locally led proposals for merging district councils in Somerset and Suffolk.

The first of these is a proposal Taunton Deane Borough Council and West Somerset District Council submitted to me in March 2017 to merge into a new, single district council. The second is a proposal Forest Heath District Council and St Edmundsbury Borough Council submitted in September 2017 similarly to merge into a new, single district council.

I am satisfied, on the basis of the information currently available to me, that each of these proposals fully meets the criteria that I told the House on 7 November 2017, *Official Report*, column 48WS, I would use for assessing proposals for merging district councils, namely that:

the proposal is likely to improve local government in the area concerned;

the proposal commands local support, in particular that the merger is proposed by all councils which are to be merged and there is evidence of a good deal of local support;

and that the proposed merged area is a credible geography, consisting of two or more existing local government areas that are adjacent, and which, if established, would not pose an obstacle to locally led proposals for authorities to combine to serve their communities better and would facilitate joint working between local authorities.

Before I take my final decisions on these proposed mergers there will now be a period until 19 January 2018 during which those interested may make further representations to me, including that if a proposal is implemented it is with suggested modifications. The final decisions would also be subject to parliamentary approval.

[HCWS294]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Transport, Telecommunications and Energy Council

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): The Transport, Telecommunications, and Energy (TTE) Council will take place in Brussels on 4 and 5 December 2017. The UK's deputy permanent representative to the EU will represent the interests of the UK at the telecommunications session on 4 December.

Telecoms

The council will seek to gain a general approach among EU member states on the proposals laying down the renegotiated regulatory framework for the Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications (BEREC). The UK is proposing to vote in favour, subject to scrutiny, having already submitted a formal request for scrutiny clearance or waiver, ahead of the council vote.

The presidency is expected to provide a progress update on the e-privacy regulation, expected to be used as a means of highlighting the importance of privacy online.

Also tabled is a policy debate on the Commission's initiative on the free flow of data proposal.

The presidency will provide information relating to the DSM initiative on 5G, with an update on the 5G spectrum road map. Additional agenda items include information from the presidency on European electronic communications code, as well as the Council conclusions on cyber security and the Council's action plan.

Other

The Council will be receiving information from the Bulgarian delegation, as the incoming presidency in the first half of 2018, to set out its work programme for the next six months.

[HCWS295]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Hague Convention on Child Abduction

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The Government have decided to opt in to the European Commission's proposals for Council decisions authorising the acceptance by certain member states of the accession of named countries to the 1980 Hague convention on the civil aspects of international child abduction, in the interests of the EU. The acceptances are as follows:

Luxembourg and Romania to accept Georgia and South Africa

Croatia, the Netherlands, Portugal and Romania to accept San Marino

Romania to accept Chile, Iceland and Bahamas

Austria and Romania to accept Panama, Uruguay, Colombia and El Salvador

The UK has already accepted all of the named countries, and therefore these Council decisions do not instruct the UK to take any action.

All EU member states are party to the 1980 Hague convention, the primary civil law international instrument which provides a mechanism to seek the prompt return of wrongfully removed or retained children to their country of habitual residence.

When a country wishes to accede to the convention, it is necessary for an existing contracting state to accept that country's accession before the convention can apply between them. It is the European Commission's view that there is exclusive competence on the EU for all matters relating to the 1980 convention and that therefore member states must be authorised by the EU to accept accessions by third countries and must do so collectively through Council decisions.

Although not anticipated in the proposals, the Government believe that the UK opt-in under the protocol to title V of the treaty on the functioning of the European Union applies and it has therefore asserted its right to choose whether to opt in and has decided that it is in the UK's best interests to do so.

The Government have taken this decision notwithstanding the fact that they dispute the Commission's claim to exclusive competence.

The Government believe that the wider significance of these proposals for external competence mean that it is in the UK's interests to participate fully in these negotiations, including having the ability to vote. These proposals must be agreed by unanimity within the EU Council.

[HCWS292]

Chemical Weapons: Syria

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I wish to make a statement about the use of chemical weapons in Syria and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)—UN joint investigative mechanism.

We condemn the use of chemical weapons by anyone, anywhere. It is of great concern that chemical weapons attacks against civilians in Syria have continued, four years after the Syrian regime used sarin in Ghouta to such horrific effect in 2013.

The UN Security Council has made clear repeatedly, in resolutions 2118 (2013), 2209 (2015), and 2235 (2015), that there would be consequences for those responsible for using chemical weapons in Syria. The Security Council thus sent a clear signal that all chemical weapons attacks in Syria must cease.

On 26 October the joint investigative mechanism (JIM) issued its report on its investigation into the incident in Khan Sheikhoun of 4 April 2017 (available at www.un.org as document reference S/2017/904). When I updated the House in April I said that the Assad regime almost certainly gassed its own people, in breach of international law and the rules of war. Nearly 100 people died and hundreds more were injured in that terrible attack. Six months later the JIM concluded that it was "confident that the Syrian Arab Republic is responsible for the release of sarin"

at Khan Sheikhoun. The JIM also concluded that it was "confident that ISIL is responsible for the use of sulfur mustard" at Um Housh on 15 and 16 September 2016. The JIM's report is the result of a painstaking, independent investigation by UN investigators.

These were not isolated incidents. The JIM had already found that the regime used chlorine as a chemical weapon on at least three separate occasions in 2014 and 2015 and that Daesh used sulphur mustard once in 2015. The OPCW reported on 2 November that sarin was more than likely used on 30 March in Ltamenah, only 15 miles from Khan Sheikhoun. The OPCW continues to investigate further reports of alleged chemical attacks by both Daesh and the Syrian regime. It also continues to investigate "gaps, inconsistencies and inaccuracies" in Syria's declaration of its chemical weapons programme.

I was appalled to see Russia veto three times the attempts by the UN Security Council to continue the JIM's investigations. Those votes, bringing Russia's vetoes on Syria to a total of 11, demonstrated Russia's overriding determination to protect its allies in the Syrian regime, whatever the crimes committed. Despite the fact that, in 2013, Russia said it had secured Syria's agreement to destroy all its chemical weapons, Syria has continued to use them. Russia's response to four confirmed chemical attacks by the Syrian regime and two by Daesh is to shut down further investigation.

The UK has been at the forefront of international efforts to ensure that reports of attacks are properly investigated and those responsible identified. The UK was proud to have supported both the JIM and the OPCW's fact finding mission, including contributing funding to the OPCW's Syria trust funds, for destruction, verification and investigative activities. And we responded to the request for assistance from the investigators by sharing information which underpinned the conclusions the UK had reached nationally and which I set out to the House in April.

We will not let Russia's actions to close down the JIM stop our efforts to uphold international law prohibiting the use of chemical weapons, and to identify and bring to justice those who violate that law. We fully support the OPCW's ongoing investigations, and other investigations into crimes committed in Syria, such as the UN Human Rights Council's commission of inquiry and the UN General Assembly's international impartial and independent mechanism (IIIM). Working with our partners on the UN Security Council and in other fora, we will actively seek to hold to account those responsible for using chemical weapons and prevent such attacks happening again.

[HCWS291]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Grenfell Tower

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): I wish to inform the House that I am today introducing changes to the dedicated immigration policy for residents of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell walk.

First, I am extending the dedicated immigration policy for survivors of the Grenfell Tower tragedy.

The extension will allow survivors who have not yet come forward to do so by 31 January 2018. Providing survivors with an additional opportunity to come forward to regularise their immigration status is consistent with the Government's objective to ensure all those directly affected receive the support they need.

Second, having reviewed the impact of the policy over the last four months, I have also decided to extend its scope to enable any Grenfell survivor with valid leave in another category to switch into the dedicated leave outside the rules policy by 31 January 2018. Individuals will no longer need to demonstrate that their leave is due to expire in the next 12 months or that they cannot qualify under another immigration route in order to be eligible under the Grenfell Tower immigration policy. They may wish to seek independent legal advice as to whether switching or remaining in their existing immigration route is the best option for them.

Finally, I have carefully considered the issue of access to public funds and I would like to provide reassurance to those who have leave in another category, such as family or work, but who qualified under the Grenfell Tower immigration policy for a change of conditions. I am announcing today that they will continue to have recourse to public funds and permission to work for as long as they qualify for leave to remain in the UK.

I hope this announcement provides further reassurance that the welfare of those directly affected by the fire is the Government's top priority. Anyone who has not yet come forward can do so before 31 January 2018 by calling our Home Office Grenfell team on 0208 196 4531 and arranging an appointment to speak to a member of our dedicated team in person.

Revised guidance with further details on the Grenfell Tower immigration policy which reflect today's announcement will be published in due course.

[HWCS297]

Retention of Communications Data

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): In order to maintain the essential capabilities of law enforcement to catch paedophiles, terrorists and criminals, the Government have announced proposed changes to the UK's communications data retention and acquisition regime to comply with the judgment handed down by the European Court of Justice in December 2016. Communications data is used in 95% of serious and organised crime prosecution cases handled by the Crown Prosecution Service organised crime division, and has been used in every major Security Service counter-terrorism investigation over the last decade. Over 50% of data sought in child abuse cases is over six months old and may simply not have been available if the Government did not have the ability to ask providers to retain communications data.

The Government have given careful consideration to a judgment handed down by the European Court of Justice in December 2016 and are proposing new safeguards to ensure we comply with the judgment while still allowing the police to use communications data to solve crimes, catch paedophiles and protect the public.

I am therefore today announcing the publication of the Government's consultation on:

changes it proposes to make, via regulations made under section 2(2) of the European Communities Act 1972, to the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 in response to the judgment; and

the draft communications data code of practice which sets out the processes and safeguards governing the retention of communications data by telecommunications operators and its acquisition by public authorities, including the police and the security and intelligence agencies.

Given the ongoing public interest in investigatory powers the Government consider it important to consult on potential changes to the legislative regime in order to inform the legislative response and subsequent parliamentary debate. The Government welcome comments on the amendments that they are proposing to the Investigatory Powers Act and on the draft code of practice. Consultation responses are particularly welcomed on the proposed amendments, although the Government will also consider other amendments that consultees consider should be made to the Act and draft code of practice more generally in response to the judgment.

The consultation will last seven weeks, taking account of the Christmas period. Copies of the consultation document, the draft code, regulations, Keeling schedule, impact assessment and case studies will be placed in the Library of the House. Online versions will be available on the www.gov.uk website.

[HCWS298]

JUSTICE

Chief Coroner: Annual Report

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): I am pleased to lay and publish the Chief Coroner's fourth annual report to the Lord Chancellor on the operation of coroner services under section 36 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 ("the 2009 Act"). The report covers the period 1 July 2016 to 30 June 2017.

In particular the Chief Coroner's report sets out:

The continuing work to promote consistency in the resourcing of and practices in coroner offices across England and Wales;

The training and guidance that coroners and their officers have received and the engagement with a wide range of stakeholders;

Recommendations to improve coroner services further.

His Honour Sir Peter Thornton QC retired as Chief Coroner on 30 September 2016 and His Honour Judge Mark Lucraft QC took up post as Chief Coroner on 1 October 2016.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank Sir Peter for his dedication to improving coroner services in England and Wales during his term as first Chief Coroner and the sound foundations he put in place for his successor, as well as for coroners more generally. Under his leadership the number of outstanding cases reduced. His guidance to coroners and training both to coroners and others have enhanced national standards and have brought a level of consistency to the coroner service across England and Wales, making sure that bereaved people are at its heart.

I would also like to record my appreciation for the fine work that Judge Lucraft has done since he took up post last year.

I am grateful too to coroners and their officers and other staff for having supported both Chief Coroners to improve services for bereaved people and for their valued and continuing frontline work.

Copies of the report will be available in the Vote Office and in the Printed Paper Office. The document will also be available online at gov.uk.

[HCWS296]

WALES

New Reserved Powers: Wales

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I have today laid regulations specifying that the new reserved powers model of devolution for Wales will come into force on 1 April 2018. I consulted the First Minister of Wales and the Assembly's Presiding Officer before making these regulations.

The new model places Welsh devolution on a firm foundation, with greater clarity on the boundary between matters that are reserved to Parliament and those which are devolved to the National Assembly for Wales.

The regulations also commence the further powers being devolved to the Assembly and Welsh Ministers under the 2017 Act, including powers over elections, transport and the environment. Most of these powers also come into force on 1 April.

The Wales Act 2017 delivers a clearer, fairer and stronger devolution settlement for Wales. Some parts of the Act are already in force, including provisions that:

reaffirm the Government's commitment to the permanence of the National Assembly for Wales (the Assembly) and the Welsh Government;

remove the requirement for a referendum before the devolution of income tax to Wales; and

double (to £1 billion) the amount Welsh Ministers can borrow to fund capital expenditure.

[HCWS293]

Petition

Thursday 30 November 2017

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Parking around Linton Avenue

The petition of residents of Solihull,

Declares that there is a problem with parking around Linton Avenue and that it is necessary for parking restrictions to be put in place.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council provide restricted parking between 09:00 - 11:00 to 14:00 15:00 on Monday to Friday around Linton Avenue.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Julian Knight, *Official Report*, 25 October 2017; Vol. 630, c. 3P.]

[P002069]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman):

The Department for Transport is responsible for setting legislation and for guidance to traffic authorities on how to provide various traffic management measures.

Local authorities have a statutory responsibility to provide appropriate traffic management schemes for their roads (under section 122 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984).

They are free to make their own decisions about the streets under their care, provided they take account of the relevant legislation. They are also accountable to local people for their decisions and their performance. It is entirely a matter for individual authorities, in this case Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, to decide on the nature and scope of parking policies and to balance the needs of residents, emergency services, local business and those who work in and visit the areas.

Local authorities can use their traffic management powers under the Road Traffic Regulation Act (RTRA) 1984 to make traffic regulation orders (TROs) to introduce traffic management measures such as residential parking schemes or other parking charges to balance the supply and demand for road space in the light of local needs.

They may impose parking restrictions over wide areas, or confine them to particular streets or parts of streets. They may prohibit parking altogether, or restrict it to particular times. They may also apply restrictions to all vehicles or just to specific classes (such as width or height) of vehicle, or to the vehicles of residents only.

Ministers and officials have no remit to intervene in the day-to-day affairs of local authorities except where specific provision has been made in legislation. All requests for parking restrictions should be made direct to the Council.

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PETITION

Thursday 30 November 2017

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**not later than
Thursday 7 December 2017**

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