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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 14 December 2017**

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# House of Commons

*Thursday 14 December 2017*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Support for Farmers

1. **Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for farmers after the UK leaves the EU. [902928]

3. **Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for farmers after the UK leaves the EU. [902930]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker):** We have been working closely with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs on support for farmers, and the Government will provide the same cash total in funds for farmer support until the end of the Parliament. We continue to work closely with a range of stakeholders across the farming industry and beyond, as well as with the devolved Assemblies.

**Wendy Morton:** I recently met local farmers in my constituency and representatives from the National Farmers Union, and understandably, Brexit was one of the things we discussed. Will my hon. Friend assure farmers across the west midlands and the rest of the UK that he has given consideration to the supply of adequate seasonal labour on which many farmers rely?

**Mr Baker:** Yes. The Government have commissioned the Migration Advisory Committee to gather evidence on patterns of EU migration and the role of migration in the wider economy, ahead of our exit from the EU. The MAC's call for evidence on EEA workers in the UK labour market closed on 27 October, but it will continue to engage with organisations to gather further evidence. The Government are clear that the UK is open for business.

**Robert Courts:** On a similar note to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), west Oxfordshire has a successful

agricultural economy, particularly, for example, in poultry farming. Businesses in my constituency are looking forward to the opportunities that will open up as we leave the European Union, but what assurances can the Minister give to those who have concerns about labour supply that either they will have access to the workers they need from the European Union, or that there will be training for British equivalents?

**Mr Baker:** At every step of these negotiations, we will work to ensure the best possible outcome for the British people, including our farming community that plays such a vital role in constituencies such as ours. No decisions have yet been made on our future immigration system. We are considering carefully a range of options and taking into account the needs of different sectors of the economy, including agriculture.

**Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): Farmers in Wakefield, Yorkshire, and across the country face a triple whammy from Brexit: the loss of common agricultural policy subsidies, and changes to the subsidy regime after 2021; tariff and non-tariff barriers; and potentially a flood of cheap imports after any new trade deal. What steps is the Minister taking to mitigate those risks?

**Mr Baker:** As I said in my original answer, we are protecting total cash payments to farmers throughout this Parliament, and that is the longest guarantee right across the European Union. I do not accept the premise of the hon. Lady's question, and we will continue to support farmers.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): With special reference to global exports, will the Minister say what discussions have been held and how the Department has sought to establish trade rights for farming exporters in my constituency, of which there are many?

**Mr Baker:** The UK farming sector enjoys a reputation for quality that has been built on high animal welfare standards, strong environmental protections, and the dedication of farmers and growers across the United Kingdom. Based on that reputation, we hope that we will flourish in the world market.

**Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): There has been a lot of focus on the uncertainty in sectors such as banking that have contingency plans for relocation. For many farmers, however, the decision is not one of relocation; it is about whether they stay in the industry at all, and we need good farmers to stay in the business. I urge my hon. Friend to work with colleagues at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and the farming unions, to develop a strong post-Brexit plan for agriculture.

**Kwasi Kwarteng** (Spelthorne) (Con) *rose—*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) has been in the House for seven and a half years, and he should not be standing for a supplementary on question 1 when his question is No. 2. It is a point so blindingly obvious that only a very clever person could fail to grasp it.

**Mr Baker:** As my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) knows, leaving the European Union means leaving the common agricultural policy. We believe that this is an opportunity to design a new agri-environment system to the benefit of our whole country.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): The red meat sector accounts for 45% of Welsh agricultural production by value, and the EU is its nearest and biggest market. Evidence from the Welsh meat marketing board, Hybu Cig Cymru, suggests that under World Trade Organisation rules, tariffs of up to 84% could be levied on cattle carcasses, 46% on lamb carcasses, and 61% on cuts of lamb. Does the Minister recognise that securing tariff-free access to the EU market is vital for the viability of Wales's livestock-dependent agriculture sector?

**Mr Baker:** We recognise that securing tariff-free access is crucial, and it is our policy to seek to do so.

### Implementation Period

2. **Kwasi Kwarteng** (Spelthorne) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of an implementation period after the UK leaves the EU. [902929]

**The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union** (Mr David Davis): As you have noticed, Mr Speaker, the questioner at least is clever, if I am not. There are three main reasons why an implementation period is in the interests of the United Kingdom and the European Union. First, it will allow the United Kingdom Government time to set up any new infrastructure or systems that might be needed to support our new arrangements. Secondly, it will allow European Union Governments to do the same. We should not forget that, while we are already planning for all scenarios, many EU Governments might not put plans in place until the deal is struck. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, it will avoid businesses in the United Kingdom and the European Union having to take any decisions before they know the shape of the final deal. I welcome President Tusk's recommendation that talks on the implementation period should start immediately and should be agreed as soon as possible.

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree that the implementation period must be finite and that it will not preclude us from engaging in third-party discussions with other countries that would like to do free trade deals with us?

**Mr Davis:** Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend on both counts. It is important that it should be finite, for a number of reasons. If we tried to go for a very extended implementation period, we would run into all sorts of approval procedure problems involving mixed approvals and so on, which we would not if it was part of the withdrawal agreement. And yes, one of the things we want to achieve in the negotiation—we still have to do the negotiation—is the right to negotiate and sign free trade deals during the course of the implementation period. That does not mean that they would come into force at that point, but it would mean that we could sign them.

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State told the Select Committee that it was the Government's intention to conclude a free trade agreement with the EU by March 2019. Last Friday, however, the Environment Secretary told the "Today" programme that ironing out the details of a free trade agreement and moving towards a new relationship would take place during the transition period. Can the right hon. Gentleman confirm that that is the Government's new position?

**Mr Davis:** The implementation period will be most valuable if companies know what the final outcome will be, because that will allow them to prepare for it. To that end, we will seek to conclude the substantive portion of the negotiation before then.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): There is talk of a two-year implementation or transition period. What is there to prevent that from simply being a two-year extension of our membership of the European Union?

**Mr Davis:** One reason is that, if we stayed in the European Union completely, we would still be subject to the duty of sincere co-operation, which is what constrains us from carrying out free trade negotiations. That is one reason, at least, why we would not do that.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Secretary of State believe that the prospect of being granted an implementation or transition period by the European Union has been improved by the Secretary of State saying that the past six months of negotiations have led only to a "statement of intent" by the Government? Would he like to restate that, in fact, the Government are committed to delivering what they have secured in the past six months of negotiations with European Union?

**Mr Davis:** As usual, the right hon. Gentleman takes a partial quote and tries to make something of it. I have said, in terms, that the withdrawal agreement will be a treaty, and treaties are binding on this country. That is what we intend. I also said, in the interview to which I think he is referring, that it is our intention, whatever happens, to protect the status of Northern Ireland, both in terms of its being within the United Kingdom and in terms of protecting the status of the border as being invisible as it is now. It would be very good if the right hon. Gentleman did not misrepresent what I have said.

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): Will the negotiations on the implementation period include matters to do with the UK's membership of the agencies of the European Union?

**Mr Davis:** I think it is unlikely that they will continue beyond the period of departure in March 2019. That is something that we have accepted from the beginning.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): How will the implementation period affect the devolved institutions, and will the powers bonanza promised by the Secretary of State for Scotland be devolved before, during or after an implementation period?

**Mr Davis:** The timetable on that will be decided within the framework that is being discussed now between the First Secretary of State and Mr Mike Russell.

### Negotiations

4. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What recent progress he has made in negotiations with the European Commission; and if he will make a statement. [902931]

15. **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What progress the Government are making on entering into trade talks with the EU. [902946]

**The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis):** Last week, we took an important step in the negotiations. As the Prime Minister confirmed, on the morning of Friday 8 December, the Government and the European Commission published a joint report on progress during the first phase of the negotiations. On the basis of this report, and following discussions last week, President Juncker is recommending to the European Council that sufficient progress has been made to move on to the next stage and begin talks on the future relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union. There is much work still to do, but I have no doubt that we are on the right path to securing the ambitious future relationship that we seek with the European Union.

**Sir Desmond Swayne:** Essential to our ambition for an excellent deal is preparation for no deal, is it not?

**Mr Davis:** That is one perspective. I will say one thing about no deal: it has become massively less probable after the decisions of last Friday. That is a good thing, because the best deal is a non-tariff, barrier-free arrangement with the European Union. However, my right hon. Friend is quite right that we continue to prepare for all contingencies and will continue to do so until we are certain that we have a good free trade deal with the EU.

**Luke Hall:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that the trade talks give us the opportunity to build on the successes of the Great British food programme, which enables British producers to increase their exports around the world and showcases some of the country's finest ciders, ales and cheeses made in the south-west?

**Mr Davis:** My hon. Friend promotes his constituency well. On the more general point, as we exit the European Union, we want to ensure that UK producers have the maximum freedom to trade with and operate within European markets and to let European producers do the same in the United Kingdom. At the same time, leaving the EU provides us with a unique opportunity to support a thriving and self-reliant farming sector that is more competitive, productive and profitable, to protect our precious natural environment for future generations and to deliver on our manifesto commitment to provide stability for farmers as we leave the EU, which my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) referred to earlier.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I can understand why the Secretary of State is not quite his usual bright-eyed and bushy-tailed self this morning, but will he discuss the suggestion of a longer implementation

period when he talks to the European Commission? Will he give the House a reason why an extended implementation period would cause difficulties that we do not understand? What research has he done on that?

**Mr Davis:** I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman thinks that I am less bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, but that is due to the extension of the single European cold, which is having a transition period of its own in my head. The simple point I made earlier was that if we try to go beyond two years, a number of European national Parliaments have said to their Governments that that would require a mixed procedure, which would involve the Walloon Parliament and 36 other Parliaments around Europe. That is the first reason. The second reason is that we have been given an instruction by 17.5 million British citizens to get on with leaving the European Union, and we have to do that as promptly and expeditiously as we can. Extending the transition period indefinitely would be seen as a breach of that promise.

**Keir Starmer** (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Whatever comes out of the negotiations, this House voted last night that Parliament should have a meaningful vote, enshrined in law, at the end of the process. That was a humiliating and entirely avoidable defeat for the Government. This House now having spoken, will the Secretary of State give an assurance that the Government will not seek to undermine or overturn last night's result on Report?

**Mr Davis:** Let me first make an observation about last night's result. The effect is to defer the powers available under clause 9 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill until after the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill receives Royal Assent, which means that the timetable will be very compressed. Those who want a smooth and orderly exit from the European Union will hopefully want to see a working statute book, so we will have think about how we respond to last night's result. We have always taken the House of Commons' view seriously and will continue to do so.

**Keir Starmer:** That was not the basis upon which the debate was conducted yesterday, so we will obviously have to come back to that.

The next accident waiting to happen is Government amendment 381, which seeks to put a fixed exit date on the face of the Bill. Rather than repeat last night's debacle, will the Government commit to dropping that ill-conceived gimmick?

**Mr Davis:** Unlike the right hon. and learned Gentleman, I do not view votes of this House of Commons as accidents; they are decisions taken by the House. We have respected the decision, as we will do the next one.

**Anna Soubry** (Broxtowe) (Con): Nobody on the Government Benches who voted against the Government took any pleasure in that—[*Interruption.*] Nobody from these Benches drank champagne. Let me just nail down that rumour—these are serious matters. I say to the Secretary of State that last night would have been avoidable if the offer of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) had been taken up, but he had no meeting with any Minister or Whip since Monday, so we are where we are.

Turning to the withdrawal and implementation Bill that the Secretary of State mentioned, when will its First Reading happen?

**Mr Davis:** The first thing I will say to my right hon. Friend is that since Monday there have been meetings between various Back Benchers and Ministers, including me—[HON. MEMBERS: “We can’t hear you.”]

**Anna Soubry:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I will not take points of order in the middle of Question Time, but I gently say to the Secretary of State that I understand his predicament. A soothing medicament may assist him, and I extend my sympathies, but he must face the House because Members are saying that they cannot hear him. I am sure he would not want to mumble deliberately.

**Mr Davis:** Good Lord, what a terrible thought.

The withdrawal and implementation Bill cannot be brought to the House until we have agreed the withdrawal agreement. The European Union negotiator expects that to be concluded in September or October 2018, which is probably right, so the Bill will be tabled after that date.

**Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab):** Sectors such as the automotive and aerospace sectors have succeeded in the UK because of the close regulatory alignment with our European partners. Is it the Secretary of State’s intention to seek as close alignment as possible in the future, or does he, like some Government Back Benchers, wish to break free from this regulatory regime?

**Mr Davis:** One of the fundamental components—indeed, possibly the most fundamental component—of the decision of the British people in the referendum was the decision to bring back control to this Parliament. That is what we will do over all sectors. It will then be for Parliament to decide whether it wants to continue to parallel, to have mutual recognition, to have mutual arrangements or to copy European Union law. We will seek to put in place mechanisms that give Parliament maximum freedom, while also allowing maximum access to the single market.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** The right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) is doing his best to imitate the launch of a rocket. I think we had better hear from the fellow.

**Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con):** I am very touched, Mr Speaker.

We all wish the Prime Minister the very best of luck today, and we hope she agrees a reciprocal free trade deal with zero tariffs. Does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State agree that the bar for success is that the deal has to be better than World Trade Organisation terms, the terms on which we trade with huge parts of the rest of the world and with other very large economies? Should the EU be unwise enough not to grant reciprocal free trade with zero tariffs, we will move to WTO terms and the Government will have no fears because they will have taken all the necessary contingency measures.

**Mr Davis:** Look, the Prime Minister said earlier this week that she still adheres to the view that no deal is better than a bad deal, and my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) has clearly defined what a bad deal would amount to—something worse than WTO terms. He is right in that respect. Of course, as I said earlier, we continue to prepare for all outcomes because, in any negotiation, we can never be 100% sure what the outcome will be.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** I appeal now to colleagues for shorter questions. I want to try to get through the bulk.

### Economic Effect

**5. Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab):** What assessment his Department has made of the economic effect of the UK leaving the EU on different sectors of the UK economy. [902932]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker):** Our sectoral analysis is made up of a wide mix of qualitative and quantitative analyses examining activity across sectors, regulatory and trade frameworks and the views of stakeholders. Our overall programme of work is comprehensive and is continually updated, but it is not, and never has been, a series of impact assessments.

**Kate Green:** Last week the Chancellor of the Exchequer told the Treasury Committee that his Department has modelled and analysed a range of potential structures between the UK and the EU and that those analyses inform our negotiating position. Given that Ministers in the Department for Exiting the European Union are responsible for our negotiations, can the Minister say whether he has read those analyses and how they are informing our negotiating position?

**Mr Walker:** We work very closely with our colleagues in the Treasury and, of course, we make sure that information is shared between us. Our negotiating position is informed, as we have repeatedly said, by a very wide range of analysis, much of which is in the form of advice to Ministers.

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con):** Paolo Gentiloni, the Italian Prime Minister, called on the EU this week to give the UK a “tailor-made” trade deal. Is it not precisely that sort of sentiment that would help all sectors if we concluded a trade deal that suited them?

**Mr Walker:** My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. We need to reflect on the fact that the UK is uniquely aligned among the countries that will be outside the EU; it is a huge market for the EU. There is a real opportunity for the EU to do a trade deal with what will be its biggest export market.

**Mr Speaker:** Two very brief inquiries. I call Peter Grant.

**Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP):** Yesterday, in response to a question from the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) querying the Government’s failure to conduct these impact assessments, the Prime Minister said:

“No, it is not the case that no work has been done in looking at that”.—[*Official Report*, 13 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 397.]

How does the Minister reconcile that statement with others previously made by the Secretary of State, as it directly contradicts them?

**Mr Walker:** I do not think it does that in any way at all. We have always been very clear that there is a wide mix of quantitative and qualitative analysis, and we draw on a range of work across government. We have released the sectoral analysis that has been done by our Department to the Select Committee, but of course what we will not do is release information that is market sensitive or that would be prejudicial to our negotiating position.

**Peter Grant:** May I gently remind the Minister, Mr Speaker, that your ruling is that the Department must provide to the Select Committee any impact assessments that have been done? The question from the right hon. Member for East Ham was not about sectoral analysis; he explicitly used the phrase:

“Assessing the impact of leaving the European Union”.—[*Official Report*, 13 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 397.]

Are the Government now telling us that “assessing the impact” is different from “an impact assessment”? If so, will the Minister explain the difference?

**Mr Walker:** My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made this very clear in his evidence to the Select Committee. The information that has been shared with the Select Committee and is available to all Members of this House in the reading room includes assessments of the impact on the regulatory matters and of the importance of EU trade to different sectors.

**Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): My constituency is heavily dependent on tourism revenue. Will the Minister inform the House of any recent discussions he has had with this important sector?

**Mr Walker:** Tourism is a hugely important part of the UK economy, and we have had regular discussions with the tourism sector and with the aviation industry that supports it. It is good to see tourism numbers in the UK hitting record levels this year.

**Jenny Chapman** (Darlington) (Lab): The Minister’s sectoral analysis might tell him that the agri-food sector in Northern Ireland depends entirely on an open border, which is to be secured on a promise of regulatory alignment. The Environment Secretary has contradicted the Prime Minister, saying that this is a perpetually open and ongoing discussion, thus placing future regulatory alignment in doubt. Is he not inflicting a lifetime of uncertainty on the agri-food sector and on the people of Northern Ireland?

**Mr Walker:** The short answer to that is no. What we are seeking to do, and what is clearly set out in the joint agreement, is ensure that the first priority for delivering on the soft border in Northern Ireland will be a strong future trade deal between the UK and the EU. Of course it is right that we ensure that where it is necessary to meet our obligations under the Belfast agreement, there will be regulatory alignment, so that we can ensure the continuing free movement of people, goods and animals across that border.

## NHS Workforce

6. **Dr Paul Williams** (Stockton South) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Health on the effect on the NHS workforce of the UK leaving the EU. [902933]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker):** We continue to work closely with the Department of Health. Reports that large numbers of EU nationals are leaving the NHS are untrue. The latest figures from NHS Digital show that there were over 3,000 more EU nationals, including 470 more doctors, working in the NHS in June 2017 than there were before the referendum result. That is an increase of 5.4%. The overall share of the NHS workforce who are EU nationals also increased over that time, from 5% to 5.2%. I believe this proves that EU nationals recognise that we value the enormous contribution they make to the NHS, and I hope the agreement on citizens’ rights reached on 8 December gives them even more certainty.

**Dr Williams:** I refer Members to my declared interest. Some 1,700 NHS doctors from European economic area countries were recently surveyed by the British Medical Association, and half were considering leaving and one in five have made firm plans to go, many after 20 years. Whatever Ministers say, the message is not reaching our doctors and nurses. What more will the Minister do to convince them to stay?

**Mr Baker:** Happily, I am married to a doctor and I read that BMA article, which is available online. I recommend to anyone that they read the entire article to put everything into context. Of course, I respect the fact that the hon. Gentleman is a doctor, but I say to all Members that it is incumbent on us all to celebrate the agreement we have reached on citizens’ rights and for every one of us, without exception, to send out the message that we value people from wherever they may come.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): Somerset Care in my constituency employs 172 European Union workers, who are vital to the care provided for those who really need it. In fact, the whole healthcare sector in the south-west already struggles to get enough staff. Will the Minister reiterate to those staff the assurance that they will be able to stay? What they really want to know is how they will stay and what they will do.

**Mr Baker:** As my hon. Friend will know, we have every intention of carrying forward the agreement we have reached to a successful conclusion, and that agreement includes provisions to ensure that the process of registering for settled status is a smooth one.

## Horizon 2020/University Admissions

7. **Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on (a) UK participation rates in Horizon 2020 and (b) university admissions. [902934]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker):** The latest figures from the Commission show that the UK has the second highest number of participations in Horizon 2020

out of all countries, with 8,056 participations to date, which is 12.6% of the total. Higher and secondary education organisations are performing particularly well, ranking first for participations and agreed funding. The majority of mobile EU students who study in Europe choose to do so in the UK, and 2017 data on applications for full-time higher education indicates that the number of international students who want to study in the UK is higher than it was in 2016. Although there was a slight dip in EU student applications in 2017 versus 2016, EU-domiciled applications were still higher than they were in 2015, 2014 or 2013.

**Jo Stevens:** Will the Minister confirm that the Government will seek to secure an early agreement with the EU on arrangements for underwriting Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+ bids for their full duration, up to the end of the programmes?

**Mr Walker:** I refer the hon. Lady to the positive news in the joint statement that was agreed last week, which reflects the fact that we have agreed to work together on these matters. For the length of the Horizon 2020 programme, up to 2020, we will continue to be able to bid into the scheme.

**Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): When we discussed this matter last month, the Minister brushed aside concerns about the falling participation rates of UK researchers in Horizon 2020 projects, but since then, as he will know, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has confirmed that in figures it has published. If participation continues to fall at that rate, by March 2019 we will have dropped by two thirds, which will be a significant blow for UK research. What assessment has the Minister made of those figures and what is he going to do about it?

**Mr Walker:** The figures actually show that the UK's funding share is holding up extremely well, which shows how competitive we are.

**Paul Blomfield:** It has fallen.

**Mr Walker:** The hon. Gentleman says it has fallen, but it has fallen from 15.3% to 14.7%. That is 15% either way. I think the joint statement will reassure people that they can continue to bid and to participate in these schemes and that the UK will continue to benefit from them, and we want to ensure that that is the case. Of course, we also want to explore the potential for a strong future relationship with the EU in this space.

**Paul Blomfield:** May I suggest two specific things that the Minister can do? Will he confirm that applications that are not fully signed off at the point at which we depart from the EU in March 2019 will be fully supported for their entire duration? Will he also say that he will put participation in framework programme 9 and successor programmes at the very heart of the ambitions for negotiating our future relationship with the EU?

**Mr Walker:** On the second part of the hon. Gentleman's question, it is clear from the science and research paper that we published earlier this year that that is our ambition. We want to explore all the potential for working with the EU on these issues. On the first part of his question, I refer him back to last week's joint declaration.

## Negotiations: Confidentiality

8. **David Morris** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of maintaining appropriate confidentiality in the UK's negotiations with the EU; and if he will make a statement. [902935]

**The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis):** The Government are conducting the negotiations while balancing the need for appropriate confidentiality with our commitment to keep Parliament and the public informed as the negotiations unfold. We have been clear that we will be as open and transparent as possible, subject to our not revealing any information that will undermine our negotiations with the European Union.

**David Morris:** We all value the Government's being open about the negotiations, when they can be. In that vein, is my right hon. Friend aware of any Opposition Member having asked the EU to be more open about its negotiating process?

**Mr Davis:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. We always hear criticism of our level of openness, but we never hear criticism of the EU's. To help us to understand that, I shall quote from the EU's own factsheet on transparency in trade negotiations:

"A certain level of confidentiality is necessary to protect EU interests and to keep chances for a satisfactory outcome high. When entering into a game, no-one starts by revealing his entire strategy to his counterpart from the outset: this is also the case for the EU."

That is the approach that the EU is taking, so it is right that we take a similar approach.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): We saw with the debacle of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership that people were very unhappy with the lack of transparency around such negotiations. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we need a much more transparent and democratic process not only for approving trade deals, but for scrutinising the negotiations as they are going on?

**Mr Davis:** I do in principle agree, which is why, when we made the sectoral analyses available to both Select Committees, in the Commons and the Lords, we also set up an arrangement for Members of Parliament—a confidential reading room—so that they could read those briefings. Generally speaking, that is our approach. I report back to this House—if the Prime Minister does not—after every round of negotiations, and that is much more than the European Parliament gets.

## Citizens' Rights

9. **Edward Argar** (Charnwood) (Con): What progress has been made on maintaining citizens' rights for (a) UK nationals living in the EU and (b) non-UK EU nationals living in the UK after the UK leaves the EU. [902936]

19. **Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): What progress has been made on maintaining citizens' rights for (a) UK nationals living in the EU and (b) non-UK EU nationals living in the UK after the UK leaves the EU. [902950]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker):** As the Prime Minister set out to the House earlier this week, an agreement has been reached that will secure the rights of 3 million EU citizens currently living in the UK and 1 million UK nationals living in the EU. This agreement will enable citizens to go on living their lives broadly as they do now in the country in which they have chosen to live.

**Edward Argar:** I welcome both that answer and the agreement that has been reached. Does my hon. Friend agree that that agreement delivers on the pledges and the reassurances that we have made consistently to EU citizens living in this country, and that, in delivering for both EU citizens in this country and British citizens abroad, it is a vindication of the practical and sensible approach taken by this Government?

**Mr Walker:** My hon. Friend will not be surprised to hear that I do agree with him. The Prime Minister has always been clear that we wanted an early agreement on citizens' rights and that any agreement must be reciprocal to protect the rights of 4 million people. I am delighted that we have delivered that commitment. The agreement will mean that UK nationals in the EU can have confidence that they can carry on living their lives as before. It will provide them with certainty about residency, healthcare and pensions, and, of course, the same goes for EU nationals in the UK.

**Mims Davies:** I recognise the huge contribution that the 3 million EU nationals living in the UK have made, particularly in the NHS, which was brought home to me by Stephane Guegan in my constituency. Can the Minister confirm that that issue will remain front and centre in any difficult negotiations going forward?

**Mr Walker:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the case of one of her constituents who has made a significant contribution. I think that we all recognise that from our own constituencies. I trust that she joins me in welcoming the cost-free exchange of EU permanent residence documents for the new settled status documents as one part of the agreement that we have reached. None the less, she is right that we must continue to take this issue seriously.

**Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab):** Unfortunately, the 3 million EU 27 citizens living in this country and the UK citizens living in the EU 27 do not feel that certainty because of the words

“nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.”

Will the Government not now commit to putting an amendment down to any of the forthcoming EU Bills to give that certainty?

**Mr Walker:** The hon. Lady will recognise that certainty in a reciprocal deal has to be delivered through the withdrawal agreement, but we have been very clear from the start of this process that we want to protect the rights of citizens and to make sure that they can continue to live their lives as before, and that is a commitment on which we have delivered through the joint resolution last week.

**Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** Due to the staffing crisis in the NHS, trusts have spent thousands of pounds recruiting EU citizens to work in the service. In York, they recruited 40 Spanish nurses; only three now remain because of the uncertainty. What assessment has the Minister made of the situation?

**Mr Walker:** I refer the hon. Lady to the answers that the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) gave earlier and to some of the facts that show that there are actually more EU citizens working in the NHS today than a year ago. We absolutely have to continue to send the message that we welcome the work that they are doing and that these people make a significant contribution to our country and our NHS.

### Economic Effects: Customs Union

10. **Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab):** Whether his Department has made an assessment of the economic effects of not forming a customs union with the EU after the UK has left the EU. [902937]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker):** In assessing the options for the UK's future outside the customs union, the Government will be guided by what delivers the greatest economic advantage to the UK and by these three objectives: ensuring that UK-EU trade is as frictionless as possible; avoiding a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland; and establishing an independent trade policy.

**Joan Ryan:** I understand that the Minister said in answer to an earlier question that some quantitative assessment has been undertaken in relation to leaving the customs union, and yet, last week, when he was in front of the Select Committee, the Secretary of State admitted that the Government had undertaken no quantitative assessment. Why is it that every time we ask a question in relation to Brexit, we get a different answer depending on the time, the day, or the Minister? If the Government simply cannot, or will not, say whether leaving the customs union will make Britain poorer, does the Minister not agree—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I think we have got the drift of what the right hon. Lady is trying to cover. Questions really need to be briefer. Otherwise, a lot of people lower down the Order Paper will not be reached, and it is not fair.

**Mr Walker:** The Secretary of State emphasised that there was not a formal quantitative impact statement, but was clear that a judgment was made on the basis of a range of evidence. The Government have been conducting an extremely broad overall programme of work on EU exit issues, and will continue to do so.

**Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con):** Is the Minister aware of whether the EU Commission is assessing the economic effects on the remaining member states of not reaching a trade deal with the UK?

**Mr Walker:** I am sure that plenty of analytical work is being done on both sides, but as my hon. Friend knows, the EU Commission does not make all its analysis public.

**Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): Surely quantitative assessments of the impact of leaving the EU on sectors of the UK economy should have been basic spade work for the negotiations.

**Mr Walker:** As the right hon. Gentleman will know, and we debated at great length, a huge amount of sectoral analysis has been done by the Government on these issues. I think that he discussed at length with the Secretary of State in the Select Committee why quantitative impact assessments were not considered appropriate.

**Mr Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley) (Con): Surely one of the assessments that the Government have made is how much money we will save by not having to pay to access the customs union, as well as the impact on all sectors of industry in this country of being able to do our own trade deals around the world.

**Mr Walker:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to the opportunities for wider trade deals around the world. As the Prime Minister has said, we will not make the same huge payments to the EU that we have to date. That will mean more money for public services in the UK.

#### EU Tangible Assets: UK Share

11. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What recent estimate he has made of the value of the UK's share of EU tangible assets after the UK leaves the EU. [902938]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker):** The Government have agreed a number of important principles with the EU that will apply to how we arrive at valuations in due course. This includes taking account of all relevant assets.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** The European Union is estimated to have a wine cellar of more than 42,000 bottles and art work worth more than £13 million, some, one might say, metaphorically looted from the capitals of Europe. After we leave the party, will the Minister promise to take back control of our fair share of this art and wine and not leave it to Mr Juncker to enjoy?

**Mr Walker:** My hon. Friend raises an interesting question. The legal basis of both assets and liabilities has been analysed in detail and accounted for in the overall settlement. The scope of the settlement is laid out in the joint report.

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): As the first advisory referendum was conducted entirely in ignorance of the contents of the wine cellars and almost everything else, and was a choice between Operation Fear and Operation Lies, is it not appropriate that we listen to all those independent bodies that have looked at the prospects

and decided that no Brexit would be better than any Brexit? Is it not time to think about a second, well-informed confirmation referendum?

**Mr Walker:** I enjoyed the hon. Gentleman's speech in our debate on a second referendum the other day, but the answer I give him today is the same one that I gave then. The referendum did not come out of the blue; it came after 30 years of debate in this country. The Government at the time wrote to every household in the country setting out the impact of leaving, and we should respect the decision of the British people.

#### EU Law

12. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that rights, entitlements, protections and standards in EU law are maintained in the UK after it leaves the EU. [902940]

18. **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that rights, entitlements, protections and standards in EU law are maintained in the UK after it leaves the EU. [902949]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker):** The UK has a proud record of protecting rights. The EU (Withdrawal) Bill aims to maximise certainty for individuals and businesses about their legal rights and obligations as we leave the EU, to provide the basis for a smooth and orderly exit. The Bill will ensure that the laws and rules that we have now will so far as possible continue to apply as they did before exit.

**Chris Elmore:** The Prime Minister has said that full regulatory alignment with the Republic of Ireland is part of the deal that she negotiated last week. Can the Minister give an absolute guarantee to the electrical engineers in my constituency that product safety and workplace practices will be guaranteed after we have left the EU?

**Mr Baker:** There are a great range of rights for which we do not rely on the European Union to meet the standards that we do. However, trade deals are always founded on WTO principles, and the WTO includes a wide range of measures in relation to technical barriers to trade, sanitary and phytosanitary protections, and other matters.

**Afzal Khan:** The charter of fundamental rights has been a valuable and accessible instrument in protecting human rights. Does the Minister agree with Liberty, Amnesty International and the Public Law Project that

“Banishing the Charter from the UK because we have other legal sources of rights would be like banning hammers because spanners can also strike nails”?

**Mr Baker:** Not incorporating the charter should not affect the substantive rights that individuals already benefit from in the UK, as the charter was never the source of those rights. Those EU fundamental rights are, in any case, applicable only within the scope of EU law. The Government have now published their analysis

of the charter, which clearly sets out how each substantive right that was reaffirmed in the charter will be reflected in the domestic law of the UK.

### Regulation of Medicines

13. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What progress the Government have made on negotiating with the EU continuing co-operation on the regulation of medicines after the UK leaves the EU. [902941]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker)**: We worked intensively with our European partners to settle the issues in the first phase of negotiations, and as the hon. Gentleman knows, we published a joint report. We now want to focus our efforts on quickly agreeing the detail of a time-limited implementation period to give certainty to people and businesses. As the Secretaries of State for Business and for Health emphasised in their open letter to the *Financial Times* earlier this year, as we enter the next phase we want to work closely with the European Medicines Agency and international partners in the interests of public health.

**Daniel Zeichner**: The high costs of not maintaining regulatory alignment for medicines were recently laid bare in evidence to the BEIS Select Committee. If alignment is not achieved, how much would prescription charges have to go up? Is regulatory alignment the Government's objective? If so, what is the point in all this?

**Mr Walker**: As part of our exit negotiations, we have been clear that we want to discuss with the EU and member states how best to continue co-operation in the field of medicines regulation in the best interests of businesses, citizens and patients in the UK and the EU. Of course, what we cannot do is prejudge the outcome of those negotiations.

### Aviation Sector

14. **Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What representations the Government have received from the aviation sector on priorities for the negotiations on the UK leaving the EU. [902942]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker)**: I can confirm to my hon. Friend that the Government are working closely with the aviation sector to ensure that it continues to be a major success story for the UK economy. Ministers and officials in our Department and in the Department for Transport have met widely with representatives of the sector since the referendum in 2016, covering the full spectrum of issues affecting the industry.

**Mrs Latham**: I thank the Minister for that answer. Given that the European Aviation Safety Agency is very important to the aerospace and aviation industries, when will it be discussed in the Brexit negotiations, as all users, such as Rolls-Royce in Derbyshire, want clarity?

**Mr Walker**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The UK has been and is very influential within the EASA, and UK expertise has contributed significantly to the high standards of aviation safety in Europe. It is the Government's intention to maintain consistently high

standards of aviation safety once we have left the EU. We are considering carefully all the implications arising from our exit from the EU, including the question of continued participation in the EASA. This will be a matter for negotiations, and we are looking forward to opening discussions on the future partnership as soon as possible.

**Conor McGinn** (St Helens North) (Lab): The Commission has made it clear that UK carriers will no longer enjoy flying rights under any agreement to which the EU is party. With one UK airline already talking about relocating, what are the Government doing to protect hundreds of thousands of aviation jobs in the UK?

**Mr Walker**: As I have said, we are working closely with the aviation industry. We look forward to discussing this issue as part of the future partnership discussions with the EU, and it is not right to rule issues out of the discussions.

### Negotiated Settlement: Referendum

16. **Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): If he will make it his policy to require the negotiated settlement on the UK's exit from the EU to be approved by referendum. [902947]

**The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis)**: Our exit from the EU is a result of a long democratic process. Parliament passed the European Union Referendum Act 2015 and passed the decision on whether to leave or remain to the people of the UK. The referendum saw a clear majority of people vote to leave the EU, and the Government were clear that we would respect the result. Parliament then voted to pass the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017 and to invoke article 50 to begin the formal process of leaving the EU. Parliament is now debating the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. This has been a long democratic process, and it continues to be one. There will not be a second referendum.

**Layla Moran**: Recent polls show there is now a clear majority in favour of a referendum on the deal. Is it any wonder that this Government have lost control? Yesterday, Parliament took back control, and now the public want to take back control from the Tory party and the Democratic Unionist party. Will the Minister please explain to my constituents how a referendum on the deal—the first referendum on the facts—would be anti-democratic? Does he not trust them—

**Mr Speaker**: Order. [*Interruption.*] Order—when I say that, the hon. Lady must resume her seat. I think we have the thrust of it, but what is required—and I am trying to be helpful to the hon. Lady—in these situations is a question, not the development of an essay theme. I am sorry, but she must learn to appreciate the difference. The question was too long, and that should not happen again.

**Mr Davis**: I am very tempted to point out the polling results of the Liberal Democrat party recently. The simple point to the hon. Lady is this: no opinion poll comes anywhere near the votes of 17.5 million people, which we will respect.

**Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Following events in the Chamber last night, some prominent members of the remain campaign took to Twitter saying that this was another step towards their aim of preventing Brexit. Will the Secretary of State please confirm and reassure the 17.4 million people who voted to leave that this Government are absolutely committed to delivering a positive Brexit for this country?

**Mr Davis:** Let me start by saying that I do not agree with the people who tweeted that that was the purpose of many of the people who voted last night—I think they did so in good faith. However, my hon. Friend is right. The aim of this Government is to take us out of the European Union. That is what we were instructed to do by the British people and that is what we will do.

### Topical Questions

T1. [902953] **Danielle Rowley** (Midlothian) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis):** Last Friday the Prime Minister and I sat down with the President of the European Commission and his chief negotiator to agree that enough progress had been made to move negotiations forward to our future relationship. This deal has involved compromise on both sides, but it adds up to a clear settlement that provides certainty for both the United Kingdom and the European Union. It will allow our country to leave the European Union and grasp the opportunities that exist outside it, while maintaining a close partnership with our European neighbours. Whether one voted leave or remain, I believe that this is a step forward that those in all parts of the House can support. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will travel to Brussels today to seek to confirm it with her fellow leaders.

**Danielle Rowley:** Last night the Government suffered an embarrassing defeat, but not one Scottish Conservative passed through the Aye Lobby and voted for the amendment. What representations did the Secretary of State have from the Scottish Conservatives on the amendment and votes this week?

**Mr Davis:** I have to be very careful because things do not always come immediately to a Secretary of State when they arrive at the Department, but as far as I am aware, none.

T4. [902957] **Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): Recreational boating is a vital part of my constituency's leisure facilities around Hamble and Netley. Will the Minister outline what assessment his Department has made of the impact of leaving the EU on recreational boating on the Solent?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker):** As a former fast catamaran sailor in the seas in the area that my hon. Friend refers to, I am happy to say that the Government's maritime and ports sectoral report sets out a description of the sector, the current EU regulatory regime, existing frameworks for how trade is facilitated between countries in the sector, and sector views. This report has been

available to Members of both Houses to read in a secure reading room. The UK will remain a great maritime nation.

**Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The House will be aware that yesterday the European Parliament had a vote on a resolution to endorse the agreement reached last week. Can the Secretary of State tell us why, unlike Labour Members of the European Parliament, Conservative MEPs were whipped to abstain and not to vote in support of that joint report?

**Mr David Davis:** That is very interesting, but it nowhere near compares with the 18 members of the Labour party who voted against.

**Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): On the basis that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, can my right hon. Friend assure the people of Willenhall and Bloxwich who voted overwhelmingly for Brexit that we will not pay a penny to the EU if we do not get a free trade deal?

**Mr Davis:** The withdrawal agreement is written in the light of article 50, which refers to "taking account of...the future relationship". If that does not happen, the whole deal falls away.

T2. [902954] **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What plans does the Minister have to write the tobacco products directive into British law? What discussions has he had with his European counterparts about the TPD?

**Mr Baker:** As the hon. Gentleman will know, the purpose of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is to bring EU law into UK law in the state it is in at our point of exit. Beyond that, in the implementation period, things are a matter for negotiations.

**Dr Sarah Wollaston** (Totnes) (Con): I recently booked an appointment in the reading room. I thought that it would be like an inner circle of hell, and that I would be trapped in there for days reading the sectoral analysis. Indeed, I was there with the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh). In fact, there were only nine pages on health and social care, and the documents relevant to my Select Committee took me less than an hour to read in their entirety. I believe that in the interests of transparency, these very straightforward documents should be in the public domain. Will the Secretary of State publish them?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker):** The sectoral analysis has already been made available to the Select Committees, as per the motion of the House, and to all Members of this House through the reading room. The documents contain a range of information, including sector views, some of which would certainly be of great interest to the other side in these negotiations.

T3. [902955] **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Following yesterday's debate, will the Secretary of State now publish a timetable of the decision-making process to give Parliament absolute clarity about when the parliamentary vote on the deal will take place?

**Mr David Davis:** That would all be fine if I could commit the European Commission to doing the same. Unfortunately, it tends to depend on how long the negotiation takes. As the hon. Lady has seen in the last six or seven months, the process has not been entirely predictable.

**Robert Courts (Witney) (Con):** Does the Minister share my passion for environmental protection, and does he agree that our leaving the European Union gives us the opportunity to go further and faster?

**Mr Robin Walker:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are a country that has been a world leader on the environment. We must ensure that we take all the opportunities offered by this process, as I believe the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is already doing, to strengthen our environmental protections.

T5. [902958] **Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab):** The Secretary of State knows very well the importance of the renewables industry to the Humber, and he knows how important it will be for the industry to be able to trade competitively when we leave the EU. Will he support new clause 83, which calls for a full impact assessment on that industry?

**Mr Baker:** The UK will continue to play an active role internationally, as demonstrated by our ratification of the Paris agreement on climate change. We will continue to uphold our obligations under international environmental treaties such as the Montreal and Gothenburg protocols, the Stockholm convention, the convention on biological diversity and the convention on international trade in endangered species. The new clause itself we will return to in debate.

**Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con):** We are leaving the European Union, the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy. As we do so, will my right hon. Friend work closely with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to ensure that we support not only the farmers and food producers in our agricultural system, but our environment?

**Mr Robin Walker:** We will absolutely continue that work, and my hon. Friend is right to link the environment to those issues. The British countryside is a fantastic asset for our entire nation, and we want to continue to support its environment and future productivity.

T6. [902959] **Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab):** Yesterday, the EU warned that the Secretary of State risks damaging trust in the negotiations with his contradictory statements, so I wondered whether he could regain some trust by telling us what the difference is between an impact assessment and a sectoral analysis.

**Mr David Davis:** The hon. Lady voted against the Second Reading of the Bill, so she plainly does not want to make progress with it. She perhaps ought to put a dictionary on her Christmas list. An analysis—*[Interruption.]* Ready? An analysis outlines the components of a problem—the regulatory structure, the markets,

the size and so on—and that is what we are doing. An impact assessment is played out in the Whitehall guidelines and involves a forecast.

**Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con):** China is a massive market. Does the Secretary of State agree that the open skies policy that was recently agreed with China, increasing the number of flights by 50% to 150 a week, will be a great boost to business throughout this country when it comes to doing trade deals with China?

**Mr Baker:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and he reminds me that according to the European Commission, 90% of world growth will come from outside the EU by 2020. I think he points to the importance of the UK turning outwards to be a global trading nation and enjoying productive, prosperous relationships with the whole world.

T7. [902960] **Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP):** The Secretary of State claims that the phase 1 agreement gives security to EU nationals, but that is constantly undermined by the reference to a no deal Brexit, which would rip that up. Does he not accept that there is a need to give legal standing to EU citizens' rights now, rather than putting EU nationals through another year of anxiety?

**Mr David Davis:** The Government have made it clear from the beginning that they value the 3.2 million EU citizens who are here, and the Prime Minister has written to them all, or at least to the ones for whom we have records. It is our clear intention, and it will be legally binding in the withdrawal Bill, that they will have the rights that we have laid out in very short order.

**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con):** Does my right hon. Friend agree that our leaving the European Union does not mean to say that we cannot co-operate with it at the very closest level on the environment, to lead the rest of the world?

**Mr Robin Walker:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right—we are leaving the European Union; we are not leaving Europe. The Prime Minister has been very clear that we will want to work together on shared challenges such as global warming and the environment.

T8. [902962] **Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab):** Does the Secretary of State agree that the worst place for someone to be in any negotiation is when they have fixed and declared their own deadline? In tabling amendment 381, the Government have effectively put a gun to their own head.

**Mr Baker:** The House voted overwhelmingly for the Act of Parliament that triggered article 50. The terms of article 50 were well known to this House, and they involve a fixed duration of two years.

**Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD):** Will the Secretary of State tell us what recent discussions he has had with representatives of the UK financial sector about the effect on that sector of the UK's leaving the single market? There are increasing reports of jobs being transferred to, or often in, other EU countries.

**Mr Robin Walker:** Since the creation of our Department, we have engaged closely with the financial services industry. We have received representations from a wide variety of stakeholders, including UK Finance, TheCityUK, the Association of Foreign Banks and the Investment Association, as well as many firms in Edinburgh, which, as the hon. Lady knows well, is a regional and global leader in, among others, the asset management and insurance industries. We will continue to work closely with them and colleagues at the Treasury to ensure that our financial services industry thrives.

**Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab):** Will the Government consider negotiating our continued participation in the Erasmus 2 programme after we have left the European Union?

**Mr Walker:** The Prime Minister said in her Florence speech that we would continue to co-operate in areas of culture and education. I believe that we should explore that in the next phase of the talks.

**Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab):** Last week's agreement recognised the rights of Northern Ireland citizens in line with the Good Friday agreement. Will the Government now be seeking the same rights for my constituents in Bristol to work, travel and live in the European Union if they choose?

**Mr Walker:** The issue of onward movement in the European Union is, of course, one that we wish to continue to press; interestingly, the European Parliament

made resolutions yesterday in support of the right of UK nationals to have onward movement in the European Union. We will continue to take that forward into the next phase of negotiations.

**Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab):** On financial services, how hopeful are Ministers that through the negotiations the UK will retain the passport for service providers to trade across the EU?

**Mr Walker:** We are at the start of negotiations on the future relationships, but we should explore all the possibilities to make sure that the UK and the EU continue to benefit from the fact that we have a global financial services centre here in London and the UK.

**Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP):** The Secretary of State for Scotland said that the Government will bring forward amendments to clause 11 of the EUW Bill on Report. Will those amendments be published and shared with the Scottish Government and Welsh Assembly before they are tabled?

**Mr Walker:** The hon. Gentleman is ingenious in raising the topic of amendments that have not yet been tabled. Of course we will want to ensure that, as we take forward our engagement with the devolved Administrations, the issue of clause 11 is addressed.

## Speaker's Statement

10.33 am

**Mr Speaker:** In view of the interest in the House, and outside, I wish, as an exception to the general rule, to make a statement about the replies I have sent today to those hon. Members who have written to me recently asking me to grant precedence to matters of privilege, relating to the motion agreed by the House on 1 November covering Brexit impact assessments.

Several Members have sought precedence to raise an alleged contempt in relation to the accounts that Ministers have given over the past 15 months of the sectoral analysis and assessment work undertaken by Departments in preparation for Brexit. I have carefully considered the representations made to me, as well as discussing the issue and the practice of the House with the Clerk of the House. I have to judge only whether to give precedence to a motion on the Floor of the House. Ministers could, with advantage, have been considerably clearer in their statements, particularly in challenging lines of questioning in Select Committees that were based on a genuine misconception. However, from the evidence I have seen to date, I have concluded that the test which I am bound to apply—that there is an arguable case that there has on this matter been a contempt of the House—has not been met in this case.

Other Members have written to me seeking precedence to raise an alleged contempt in relation to the response by the Secretary of State to the motion for an address agreed on 1 November. I have carefully considered the representations made to me, as well as discussing the issue and the practice of the House with the Clerk of the House. I have to judge only whether to give precedence to a motion on the Floor of the House. While it was most regrettable that the Secretary of State—this is a point that I made to him privately, but now state publicly—unilaterally excised some material from the papers he provided, and that it took so long to provide the papers, I also feel bound to pay due attention to the formally recorded view of the Committee that the Secretary of State had complied with the order of 1 November. I have concluded, from the evidence I have seen to date, that the test which I am bound to apply—that there is an arguable case that there has on this matter been a contempt of the House—has not been met in this case.

I do not judge that points of order can arise from these rulings.

## Business of the House

10.36 am

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

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom):** The business for the week commencing 18 December will be as follows:

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

**TUESDAY 19 DECEMBER**—Continuation of consideration in Committee of the Finance Bill (day 2), followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to terrorism, followed by a motion to approve European documents relating to the Schengen information system.

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

**THURSDAY 21 DECEMBER**—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**—The House will not be sitting.

The business for the week commencing 8 January will include:

**MONDAY 8 JANUARY**—Second Reading of the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill.

Colleagues will also wish to know that remaining stages of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will take place on Tuesday 16 and Wednesday 17 January 2018.

Six months have passed since the awful tragedy at Grenfell Tower. Our hearts go out to those who suffered such trauma and have had to rebuild their lives after such terrible loss. This was a truly unimaginable tragedy, and it should never have happened. Today's memorial service will remember those we lost and will thank the emergency services, the recovery team, the community, public support workers and volunteers, who did everything they could on that terrible night.

**Valerie Vaz:** I thank the Leader of the House for the future business. I note that she has only gone as far as 8 January, so I am unsure whether the date for the restoration and renewal debate has also been fixed for the 11th, or if it is going to be moved.

They say that good things come in threes. First, tomorrow is Save the Children Christmas jumper day, and I hope we will all be wearing one. Secondly, we congratulate the new Senate member for Alabama, the Democrat Doug Jones, on his victory for politics being about hope, not division. Thirdly, of course, there is the matter of yesterday: we are very pleased that, finally, Parliament has been recognised as being sovereign. The amendment brings back to Parliament a final vote on the deal so that the UK Parliament, just like every other Parliament in the EU, can have a say. It enables us to do our job. Mr Speaker, you may have thought that three was the magic number, but actually it is four. Before anything happens to those MPs who voted to bring

[Valerie Vaz]

sovereignty back to Parliament, let us remember that there are many Maastricht rebels still sitting in this House.

Following on from the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, there will be many statutory instruments. The Government made the concession of accepting amendments from the Procedure Committee, so when will the new sifting committee be set up, and will the Leader of the House ensure that its chair comes from the Opposition?

Mr Speaker, I heard what you said about contempt in relation to the sectoral analyses and impact assessments. I have seen the documents, but we almost had to sign a note to say that we would not reveal what is in them. It is unacceptable that democratically elected Members of Parliament cannot share that information with our constituents. The Leader of the House said last week that only 16 Members and Peers had seen them. Any commercial information contained in the documents may or may not be excluded. If they are just matters of fact, I see no reason why Members cannot read the documents in the Library and why they cannot be published. I am not sure if I can reveal this, but many of the footnotes come from the Office for National Statistics, so they are, in any event, in the public domain.

Having undertaken the biggest reorganisation of the NHS, the Government have now embarked on yet another, with sustainability and transformation plans. If that were not enough, they now intend to bring forward regulations to support the setting up of accountable care organisations, an idea imported from the United States. It is not clear how the ACOs will be accountable to the public, what the levels of private sector involvement will be, and what the implications will be for NHS staff. We have had CCGs, STPs and now ACOs—they are becoming the Government's acronyms of incompetence. The shadow Secretary of State for Health has written to the Leader of the House about the matter, and I ask again: is it the Government's intention to lay the regulations before the House in the new year, and if so, when? Will the right hon. Lady reassure the House that there will be adequate time for a debate and a vote?

We have a Government who cannot make a decision. We have a new industrial strategy but no decision on the Swansea tidal lagoon. After a review by one of the Government's own former Ministers, we had a letter on 20 November signed by 100 businesses. Labour Members have secured Adjournment debates and asked oral and written questions on this matter. The latest response is that a decision will be made in due course. Will the Leader of the House please say what that means, or is it the case that the Government do not want to invest in Labour Wales?

I turn to Opposition day motions and how information is dealt with. It is crucial that the Opposition and Members are able to hold the Government to account. In a written statement on 26 October, the Leader of the House said that the relevant Minister would respond to Opposition day motions in no later than 12 weeks. My hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), the shadow Secretary of State for Education, made a point of order last week. She said she had received a response—a written statement published on the very last day—in relation to the motion on tuition fees, but it had no bearing whatever on the motion, and there was no opportunity for the Opposition to question

Ministers. Will the Leader of the House meet me and perhaps discuss with the House authorities how we can take this forward, so that we can have proper information with which to hold the Government to account? That is our job.

I would like to mention the passing away of the former MP Jimmy Hood. He was 69 years old. He was a Member for 28 years and a good servant of the House. He served as Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee, as well as being a member of the Panel of Chairs for 14 years. He served the House well and we honour his memory, just as I join the Leader of the House in honouring the memory of those who died at Grenfell Tower. There was a memorial here yesterday, which was attended by you, Mr Speaker, and today's memorial service at St Paul's cathedral will be attended by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. But, the shadow Housing Minister has asked the Prime Minister why, after she said that she had

“fixed a deadline of three weeks for everybody affected to be found a home nearby”, that has not taken place.

Mr Speaker, as you lit the Hanukkah candle yesterday in Speaker's House, candles will be lit at St Paul's any minute now to remember the innocent dead. One minute people were watching television or doing their homework; the next, they were dead. The light has gone out of their lives, but the flame of remembrance will continue to burn as we remember them today and always.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I share in the hon. Lady's great tribute to those who suffered so much in the Grenfell tragedy. Our thoughts and prayers are with them today—and all the time. The Government have been committed, all the way through this last terrible six months for the survivors and the families, to ensuring that their needs will be taken care of, and we remain absolutely committed to that.

I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to Jimmy Hood, who was a good servant to this House. He is remembered with great fondness by Members right across the House.

The hon. Lady asked about the scheduling of the debate on restoration and renewal. She will be aware that a number of representations have been made by Members on both sides of the House, and we are looking into options other than a Thursday for that debate. Colleagues will appreciate that there are a number of priorities to consider when scheduling the business that we take through the House, but we are listening to the representations about the debate, and the future business will continue to be announced in the usual way.

The hon. Lady asked about the sifting committee. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) for the work of the Procedure Committee in proposing amendments. I am happy to confirm that I will propose changes to the Standing Orders once the Bill has received Royal Assent, so that the sifting committee can begin its work as soon as possible.

The hon. Lady asked about viewing the sectoral analysis. She will be aware that the Government have satisfied the terms of the motion. Mr Speaker, you have just confirmed that you have taken advice from the Brexit Committee, which is satisfied that there has been no contempt. On further representations, you have confirmed that that remains your view.

On ACOs—this is an important point—the new care models were proposed by NHS England as part of the five year forward view to address the three major challenges facing the health and care system: the health and wellbeing gap; the care and quality gap; and the funding and efficiency gap. They are intended to improve integration between different services to ensure that we are delivering joined-up, patient-centred care that is preventive, of high quality and efficient. I think we can all agree that it is vital that we focus on making the most productive use of the resources available to us in the NHS.

On the subject of Opposition day debates, I can only remind the hon. Lady of what I said in my written ministerial statement:

“Where a motion tabled by an opposition party has been approved by the House, the relevant Minister will respond to the resolution of the House by making a statement no more than 12 weeks after the debate. This is to allow thoughtful consideration of the points that have been raised, facilitate collective discussion across Government, especially on cross-cutting issues, and to outline any actions that have been taken.”—[*Official Report*, 26 October 2017; Vol. 630, c. 12WS.]

In the circumstances mentioned by the hon. Lady, that commitment was fulfilled by my right hon. and hon. Friends.

The hon. Lady asked about the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon, which is a complex and expensive project. Our track record on renewable generation is excellent, with 26% of electricity derived from renewables in the year to September 2016. PwC has confirmed that we are decarbonising faster than any country in the G20, so our resolve to improve renewables and low-carbon electricity sources should not be ignored.

Finally, the hon. Lady raised the question of action taken for the victims of Grenfell Tower. I reiterate that we are working closely with the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea to ensure that we provide all 151 households from Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk with a new home in social housing.

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): May I suggest to my right hon. Friend that it might be sensible to have another Grenfell United meeting in, say, six months' time? We will not forget what we heard this week, but I think that a repeat would be a good idea, so that we can hear more from those who have life after death.

In this season of good will, and especially in view of the Foreign Secretary's visit to Iran, might it be a good idea—perhaps in the first week after the recess—for the relevant Ministers to look through cases of deportations from this country? They might ask whether it is seriously sensible to try to expel someone who has lived here for much of his life, has lost both his hands and feet after a criminal attack, and yet has still not been given leave to remain in this country, where the attack took place.

Ministers might also review the case of someone who, although he has not lived in Ghana for more than a year since he was four, is up for deportation because he served his sentence in this country as an adult. It seems to me that some of the cases are so absurd that if the Foreign Ministers of the countries involved came here, we ought to pay as much attention to them as we hope Iran will to our Foreign Secretary.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The only words that were missing from that quite lengthy and absolutely fascinating essay were a request for “a statement or a debate”.

**Sir Peter Bottomley:** I hope, Mr Speaker, that I said “in the first week after we come back”, rather than “next week”.

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Gentleman did refer to the first week back but, if memory serves me correctly, he did not refer to a statement or a debate, which is not beyond his competence. We will leave it there, but let me very gently say to other Members that, although they may wish to imitate the hon. Gentleman in all sorts of ways, they should not seek to imitate him in respect of length today.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I entirely share my hon. Friend's desire for a further review of the experiences of Grenfell survivors six months from today. As for his point about deportations, I am not aware of the specific cases that he raised, but I am sure that Foreign Office Ministers will be happy to discuss them with him.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the house for announcing the business for next week. I also thank you, Mr Speaker, for your helpful statement. I fully appreciate the consideration that you have given to this very serious matter.

In the wider context, however, something has to change. Something has to happen. We have to get the House back on an even keel. All these issues and difficulties are down to the simple fact that the Government are not prepared to participate fully in the democratic structures of the House. The current position is clearly unsatisfactory: it is contrary to all our democratic instincts, and it is badly letting down the constituents whom we represent and serve. When Governments avoid votes and diminish the significance of Oppositions to hold them to account, bad stuff happens. Bad stuff happened on this occasion, and it has to stop. Let us return the House to the conditions before the last election and administer a democracy of which we can all be proud, so that all of us in the House can be happy and satisfied.

I know that it is party season, but today feels very much like the morning after the night before. It is almost palpable, as the groggy heads in the Government start to assess last night's defeat for their mad hard Brexit plans. Hopefully this will be the first step on the brake of sanity, and this madness can be slowed down and put back under democratic control. One of the lessons of last night is that there must be inclusivity. There must be cross-party talks about the Brexit process, and they must involve democratic Assemblies and legislatures throughout the United Kingdom.

May we have a debate on trading standards? I think the feeling in Scotland is that we have been sold a Tory pup. When they were elected, the Scottish Conservative MPs vowed to be a distinctive Scottish voice here, always acting in the Scottish interest. They were Ruth's Tories, proudly and defiantly taking on the Scottish Government. But what have we found? For six months they have been nothing other than Tory lobby fodder for this chaotic Government, right down to their Whip-distributed cotton socks. Scotland is demanding its money back, but if we cannot get our money back, can we please replace those hon. Gentlemen with real champions for Scotland who will act for its interests in this House of Commons?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman is obviously on good form this morning, although I think he made a bit of a slip-up in calling my colleagues hon. Gentlemen. I am not sure that they are all hon. Gentlemen; I think that there may be an hon. Lady or two among them. I take them extremely seriously, because I think they make an enormous contribution to their constituencies in Scotland. They regularly attend business questions so that they can raise constituency issues, and I encourage them to continue to do so.

The hon. Gentleman did not mention the £2 billion of additional funding for Scotland that was announced by the Chancellor in the recent Budget. That good boost to Scottish finances should enable the Scottish Government not to take the step of making Scotland the most highly taxed part of the United Kingdom.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the question of democracy and listening, and he will be aware that we have had countless opportunities to discuss Brexit in this place. The Government have been listening, and I myself have taken part in a number of discussions about how we can more carefully accommodate views across the House. We have been listening carefully, and I have been delighted to accommodate the efforts of the Procedure Committee to create a sifting committee, which is something that the House is keen to see. We have had eight hours of protected debate on each of the eight days for the Committee of the whole House, and we have exhaustively considered every aspect of this debate. That is certainly not evidence of a failure to communicate or engage. The Government are listening, and we are keen to engage right across the House. That will continue to be the case as we seek to leave the EU with a great deal for all parts of the United Kingdom.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Before the debate that the Leader of the House has announced, will she reflect on the fact that many of Sir Winston Churchill's greatest wartime speeches were made from Church House, to which this House had decanted? Does she consider that that might be an appropriate location?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My right hon. Friend will no doubt want to take part in the debate on restoration and renewal, but it is vital to focus on the key issues. First, we must protect this palace for future generations. It is a world heritage site and receives more than 1 million visitors a year. Its future is paramount, but so too is keeping in mind the cost to taxpayers, and we must focus on the best value for money we can get.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for her statement and for the cordial meeting that she held with me last week to discuss a range of issues. May I ask her again for early notice of any time allocation for the Backbench Business Committee for January, so that Members can be given ample notice of the time of debates in which they wish to participate, both in the Chamber and Westminster Hall?

I have one little gripe: the Backbench Business Committee has a membership of eight and, unusually, a quorum of four, which is greater than the quorum for bigger Select Committees with a membership of 11. Can we look at that issue in the Standing Orders? A quorum of three would be ample and mean that we could get the

business done. Will the Leader of the House have a word with her colleague, the Chair of the Selection Committee, the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) who is in his place, and ask him not to pick members of the Backbench Business Committee for statutory instrument Committees that sit when the Backbench Business Committee is due to meet?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am always happy to address representations from the hon. Gentleman, and I will look into the points he has raised.

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): Last week, General Electric announced the loss of 1,000 jobs in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey). May we have a statement from the Government on the support that will be provided to those trained and excellent workers to help them find other work and to show how the United Kingdom Government will support power engineering so that it can maintain and grow its position in research, manufacturing and exports?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am sorry to hear of those potential job losses, and my hon. Friend is right to support his constituents in this way. The Government regularly meet General Electric to discuss its UK business, and as my hon. Friend will know, in November it announced plans for a global restructuring. A consultation is under way on the redundancies, and the exact timescale is yet to be announced. The Government stand ready to support anyone who loses their job, through the Department for Work and Pensions and its rapid response service.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I want to raise the issue of rough sleeping. My constituents are contacting me, and they are really concerned about the rapid rise in the number of people sleeping on the streets, especially in this bitter weather. I understand that Hull City Council has done it is very best to prevent more than 5,000 cases of homelessness over the past year, but there has still been a 75% increase in rough sleeping. May we therefore have a debate in Government time on why rough sleeping has doubled in this country since 2010, and risen particularly in the last year?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this subject. It is extremely disturbing to see anyone sleeping rough in our country. The Government are investing a significant sum to eliminate rough sleeping altogether by 2027 and to halve it by 2022. In my own area, the Hope Centre in Northampton, of which my husband is vice-chairman, is doing excellent work, as are so many homelessness charities around the country, to try to ensure that no one has to sleep rough during this cold patch. I share the hon. Lady's concern, and she might well wish to seek a Back-Bench debate to discuss this very concerning issue.

**Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger** (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Following on from what my colleague has just said, this week two very vulnerable people were driven from Taunton Deane and left in Bridgwater on an excuse that I find utterly unacceptable in the 21st century. Unfortunately, they were left there to fend for themselves for two nights, and an awful tragedy could have occurred.

If it had not been for very kind people, we would have had a nightmare on our hands. May I echo the call from my Labour colleague? May we please have a debate in this House on homeless people and people who are vulnerable in our society? Dumping is not acceptable, and can we please have a debate in Government time to talk about this?

**Andrea Leadsom** *rose—*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Just before the Leader of the House responds, I listened most attentively to what the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) said, and I say very politely to him that if he is going to refer to another hon. Member's constituency, it would be a courtesy to notify that Member in advance. That is all I want to say. These matters should be sorted out between colleagues, and this is what I would call a point of courtesy rather than a point of order.

**Andrea Leadsom:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Again, I completely share this concern about homelessness and rough sleeping. It is a huge worry across the House, and I encourage all hon. Members to consider combining to hold a Back-Bench debate on the subject. We have implemented the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which was introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), and we have allocated £550 million to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping through to 2020. We have also provided £10 million of funding to support eight new social impact bond projects, so that we can give targeted support to the most difficult issues around rough sleeping.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): I am grateful that the Leader of the House is thinking of moving the debate on restoration and renewal to a different date, because I think it is better not to have it on a Thursday. May we also have a debate on the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, specifically because of the way in which our staff are treated? Most employers in this country now bring forward the December staff salary payment to before Christmas. Why on earth cannot IPSA do that?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman raises a very interesting point, which I would be happy to look into on his behalf.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): East Worthing will be much briefer than West Worthing, Mr Speaker, and I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. When are we going to have a debate on the parlous state of children's social care?

**Mr Speaker:** That was splendidly pithy by the standards of the hon. Gentleman. We are deeply obliged to him.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend and I share a deep interest in the plight of some of those in their earliest years and the importance of secure early attachment for the mental and emotional wellbeing of children right the way through their lives. I am always happy to support him in his efforts to secure debates in the House on that subject.

**Norman Lamb** (North Norfolk) (LD): I have details here from Norfolk police of regular occasions on which people are held unlawfully by the police while they are waiting for mental health services to respond. In one such case, someone was detained for 68 hours in police custody. We know that this is happening regularly around the country. Will the Leader of the House arrange for the Health Secretary to make a statement to the House on this? It is surely intolerable that the police should be put into a position where they have to detain people unlawfully because of the failures of the mental health services.

**Andrea Leadsom:** The Government have shown huge commitment to improving mental health, and many more people are accessing mental health services than ever before. However, I share his concern about his specific points and encourage him to attend Health questions next Tuesday, where he will have the opportunity to question Ministers directly.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your words about the courtesies of the House and how we should conduct ourselves.

Last week, I met the Taunton chamber of commerce, most of whose members are small and medium-sized businesses, which are the backbone of Taunton and Wellington's thriving economy. However, enabling them to grow is important as we move forward, particularly given Brexit, so may we have a debate on how to benefit the SME sector, particularly in the south-west, with specific reference to how to unlock opportunities through the Government's commendable industrial strategy?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I totally agree with my hon. Friend. SMEs are the lifeblood of our economy, and they absolutely deserve our praise and support. I congratulate Taunton chamber of commerce on putting in place some incredibly smart measures to support local businesses. Our industrial strategy will support businesses. The retail sector, for example, will benefit from business rates relief, the cutting of £10 billion of red tape and improved access to finance.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Parliament uses Servest, so I want to tell the House how that company treated my constituent Mr Iqbal when he worked for them: it deducted break time for breaks he was not allowed to take; it refused to give him annual leave, but then held him to the company rule that he was not allowed to carry any over; and it refused to give him expenses when he was moved to another site. Due to the tribunal fees introduced by this Government, he was unable to take the company to court. I have managed to get him some money back, but Servest has not engaged with me in any meaningful way to get Mr Iqbal his full compensation. Will the Leader of the House confirm that she will review how Servest treats its employees and advise how I can get the settlement that my constituent is due?

**Andrea Leadsom:** As so often, the hon. Gentleman raises a serious constituency issue, and I recommend that he seek an Adjournment debate to address the matter directly with Ministers.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani** (Wealden) (Con): This evening, I will be joining the Uckfield chamber of commerce, which celebrates small businesses across my constituency and provides opportunity and security, at its Christmas dinner. A thousand jobs have been created every day since 2010, so will the Leader of the House provide time for a debate on the Government's success in the area of employment?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am pleased to join my hon. Friend in welcoming the latest employment figures and in congratulating Uckfield chamber of commerce on its work to support businesses. There are now 325,000 more people in work than at this time last year, and youth unemployment is down 416,000 since 2010. I am sure that the whole House will welcome those figures.

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Last night, we had the unedifying sight of a Minister frantically coming to the Dispatch Box to give concessions to his own Back-Benchers to push through Government policy. In last week's debates on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, many Government Back Benchers said that clause 11 was deficient, but amendments were not tabled. May we have a statement or debate on when the Government will actually bring forward amendments to clause 11, which Government Members say is deficient?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, as I have just announced, day eight of consideration of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will happen next week, so he might want to raise that point then.

**Bill Wiggin** (North Herefordshire) (Con): The whole House will agree that constituencies ought to be equalised, but our departure from the European Union has ensured that we will be cutting the cost of governance. Will the Leader of the House therefore ensure that any private Member's Bill coming along that might correct the 650 to 600 debate gets the money resolution it needs?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I will look closely at my hon. Friend's suggestion.

**Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): I declare a registerable interest, having travelled to Bangladesh with Muslim Charity to see the Rohingya refugee camps.

May we have either an early statement or a debate on the situation of the Rohingya? There were a number of debates focusing on the crisis as people fled Myanmar, but the situation now is that 800,000 people are living in camps, including 36,000 unaccompanied children and 30,000 women who have been raped and are now pregnant. They need clean water and help to address the problem of refuse. What will be the ongoing commitment of our Government and of Ministers in the Department for International Development to help to address the plight of the Rohingya?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I commend the hon. Gentleman for going to see the camps for himself. A number of hon. Members from both sides of the House have been to lend their personal support, for which I commend them all. This is a harrowing case. We have had three debates and urgent questions on this subject since September, and the Government are watching the situation incredibly closely. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for

International Development has announced a further £12 million of UK aid to help to support the Rohingya people, bringing the UK's total support to £59 million. I commend the generosity of the British people who have personally contributed millions of pounds to help to support the Rohingya people.

**Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): According to the latest figures from the Office for National Statistics, unemployment in Crawley has reduced by 59% since 2010. May we have a debate early in the new year on continuing economic policies that increase employment and, therefore, revenue for our important public services?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am delighted to hear the employment statistics in my hon. Friend's constituency. He shares my enthusiasm for the fact that employment is up by more than 3 million since 2010. That is more people than ever before with the security of a pay packet to support themselves and their families.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The Government's draft Public Service Ombudsman Bill is of great interest to many of my constituents who are victims of the collapse of the AEA Technology pension scheme, which cannot be investigated due to a loophole in the law. Will the Leader of the House find time to introduce this important Bill in the new year?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady will be aware that the Government carefully consider all potential Bills and try to accommodate, as far as possible, those important Bills that could improve the lives of all our constituents. She raises an important issue, which I will certainly look at.

**Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con): May we have a debate in the House on the very damaging taxation policies being pursued by the Scottish National party? Those policies will have a huge impact on my Moray constituents and on people across Scotland. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the SNP, as it prepares to announce its Budget in Holyrood today, should stick with its manifesto commitment, on which it went to the Scottish public, not to raise the basic rate of income tax? The SNP should stick with that commitment to prevent Scotland from being the highest taxed part of the United Kingdom.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend continues to be a champion for his constituents, and he is absolutely right to raise his concerns. Income tax powers were an important part of the Smith commission's recommendations, and we devolved them through the Scotland Act 2016. It says a lot about the priorities of the Scottish Government that, within just a year of having those powers, they are threatening to renege on a manifesto commitment. As I said earlier, it would be a great shame if Scotland were to become the highest taxed part of the United Kingdom.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Leader of the House understand that 1,300,000 people will be killed this year by road death? This week, legislators from all over the world, including the Speaker of the Moldovan Parliament, came to this Parliament, under the auspices of the Towards Zero Foundation, to

debate how we can tackle road deaths. This is the greatest epidemic of our time. May we have a debate on it in the new year?

**Andrea Leadsom:** Governments of all colours have tried hard to ensure that we reduce the incidence of road traffic accidents and that we try to provide all drivers with the right know-how to be able to drive safely and carefully. The hon. Gentleman will be aware of forthcoming legislation on driverless vehicles, which presents an opportunity to improve road safety. Nevertheless, he might wish to seek an Adjournment debate, so he can discuss the specific and very good work of the organisation he mentions.

**Damien Moore (Southport) (Con):** The Government have committed to help at least another 11 million children in the poorest countries to get a decent education by 2020. Will the Leader of the House find time to hold a debate on the importance of investing in education as a means of helping children out of poverty?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend raises something that the UK Government are extremely proud of: our international aid efforts to support all young people everywhere to get a decent education. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate or perhaps a Backbench Business Committee debate, so that all colleagues can celebrate the contribution of the UK's people towards ensuring education for all.

**Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab):** An estimated 1,400 people with dementia will be stuck in hospital on Christmas day, so dementia patients will make up a quarter of the people who will spend this Christmas day in hospital because of delays in finding them care. With the Alzheimer's Society describing wards as being "turned into waiting rooms", will the Leader of the House grant parliamentary time to discuss this important breakdown in social care?

**Andrea Leadsom:** We all share in the desire to see as many people as possible receiving the right sort of care and protection, and some company, particularly at Christmas. The issue of loneliness has been raised in this Chamber a great deal. We all know the NHS faces increased pressures at winter time, which is why we have put in place an extra £335 million, on top of the previously announced £100 million, for accident and emergency departments. Nationally, more than 1,000 extra beds have been freed up since February by reducing delays in the transfer of care, and areas continue to work to increase that number to 2,000 to 3,000 extra beds over the winter period. This is really important for those who find themselves in hospital during the Christmas period.

**John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con):** Will the leader of the House join me in congratulating Elaine Monro and Selkirk's Cancer Research UK committee for launching the Cancer Research UK tartan scarf, which is being produced by Lochcarron Weavers in Selkirk? Elaine and some of her colleagues are in the Gallery today showing off the wonderful scarf. Will the Leader of the House consider arranging for a debate on how the Government work with and support the excellent work of Cancer Research UK and

other charities in fighting cancer? Does she agree that it is a very fetching tartan, which will no doubt raise lots of money for Cancer Research UK?

**Andrea Leadsom:** By sheer coincidence, this morning I decided to wear a pink jacket and when my hon. Friend presented me with this wonderful scarf that Elaine and her colleagues have produced for Cancer Research UK, I was absolutely delighted to find that the chill in this Chamber could be offset by something warm from Scotland. I am delighted with the contribution of all of those volunteers to Cancer Research UK, as I have had family members suffer from this terrible disease. We should all celebrate the excellent work of volunteers.

**Mr Speaker:** I am most grateful to the Leader of the House. If I had known of the intention of the hon. Gentleman in advance, and of the sartorial plans of the Leader of the House, I would have worn a pink tie, of which I am proud to say I have several. Nevertheless, the important point is that the great cause has been eloquently highlighted, and that is what this place exists to do.

**Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab):** Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to come urgently to the House before Christmas to explain why his Department is failing to get a grip on the poor assessments that are taking place for those people applying for the personal independence payment? I have encountered a case just recently involving a lady who has had cancer. The impact of it has been massive; its effects on her have been life-changing. When I challenged the case, I was told that the way it had been assessed had been below standard. It is not acceptable for people to be suffering in this way and denied payment, so will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State to come here urgently to make a statement?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman raises a concerning case, and I am sure Ministers would be happy to talk to him about it. If he would like to email me, I will be able to take it up on his behalf. What I would say is that this Government have been committed to helping those with disabilities to take control of their own care and to be able to be funded to meet their own needs. We have been committed to helping them to get into work, which for many people gives them the opportunity to contribute and to have the self-confidence that arises from being able to work within their capability to do so.

**Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con):** On one of the busiest Saturdays in the run-up to Christmas in Totnes, local activists—including, sadly, the local Labour party—decided to parade with a real coffin and leave a large and carefully constructed model of a coffin at my constituency office. Does the Leader of the House feel, particularly in the light of the report on intimidation in public life that was published yesterday, that the line of decency was overstepped? There are real dangers in using the imagery of death and directing it against individuals to whip up hatred. Most importantly of all, this kind of thing deters really good candidates from applying for positions in public life.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I was disgusted, as I am sure all right hon. and hon. Members were, to hear about my hon. Friend's awful experience. I texted her at the time to say that I hoped she was okay. It must have been absolutely terrifying. It was truly horrible and we should all condemn this kind of behaviour and call it out wherever we see it. Lord Bew's report on the abuse and intimidation of candidates highlights that this is not a simple matter of holding politicians to account. It goes far beyond that and it will be a deterrent to diversity and the high calibre of candidates we want to see standing for Parliament. We all combine in condemning that action against my hon. Friend.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate in Government time—do not refer me to an Adjournment debate—on the impact of Brexit on the national health service and the threat of privatisation? Many of my constituents are concerned about that.

**Andrea Leadsom:** Since September, the Department for Exiting the European Union has answered departmental questions on three occasions, including this morning; DExEU Ministers have made several oral statements and appeared before the Exiting the European Union Committee on three occasions; and you, Mr Speaker, have facilitated four urgent questions, in addition to the many hours we have already spent discussing legislation. We will, of course, be discussing further legislation in great detail over the next 18 months, so I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will have ample opportunity to raise his specific concerns.

**Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): May we have a debate on dementia in Government time? Many Members have or have had family members who suffer from this wicked and cruel disease. May we have a debate that covers not only the disease itself but the social care system, the health service and all the other aspects of society on which dementia touches? Hopefully, we can then take forward some action.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend raises an issue that is of concern to us all in our constituencies, and often also in our families. It is certainly an increasing problem in the United Kingdom and around the world and we should discuss it regularly, so I encourage him to seek perhaps a Back-Bench debate on the subject, so that we can look at exactly what further measures can be taken to ensure that we do the best we can for those suffering from dementia, and for their families and friends.

**Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): As part of the work of the cross-party commission that is looking into the root causes of youth violence, this week we heard from a panel of experts about the public health approach to reducing violence and the evidence-based results that they have achieved. May we have a debate on this extremely important issue?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady has worked really hard on that issue, for which I absolutely commend her. I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate on the subject; I am sure it would be of interest to a great number of Members.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): On Tuesday night, Members from all parties attended a Grenfell United meeting to which you, Mr Speaker, gave a deeply emotional and moving introduction. The survivors told stories that are truly harrowing, and the reality is that this Christmas most of them will still be in hotels or bed-and-breakfast accommodation. The people of this country very willingly parted with huge amounts of money to provide compensation for the victims. That money cannot bring their relatives back, but it does not appear even to be reaching the victims, many of whom are still in temporary housing. May we have two statements: first, a statement from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government on the progress of rehousing the survivors; and secondly, a statement from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, whose Department I understand is responsible for the distribution of the money to the victims, on where that money is going and how it is going to reach the victims, so that they can at least live their lives in some degree of comfort?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend raises some very important points, and I will happily go away and discuss them with our hon. Friends in the Department for Communities and Local Government. What I can say is that the latest figures that I have from the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea are that 142 of the 151 households have accepted an offer of either temporary or permanent accommodation. Ninety-nine of those have moved in: 54 have moved into temporary accommodation and 45 into permanent accommodation. However, as all hon. Members will know and appreciate, we can move only at the pace at which those survivors wish to go. It is a very difficult area and no one wants to force anyone to move at a pace with which they are uncomfortable. I hope that all hon. Members will rest assured, however, that the Government are utterly determined to provide the right level of support and care for all those who are still very much suffering at the present time.

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): Given the ongoing problems with the roll-out, is it possible to have a statement or an urgent debate on universal credit? A family in my constituency were told to claim universal credit and that shut down their child tax credit claim. That was the wrong advice as they had more than two children. They are now being told to claim jobseeker's allowance, but Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs will not reinstate, or backdate their child tax credits. Therefore, there are eight people in one household in my constituency living on less than £1.60 a day. Given the UN's target that no one should be below \$2 a day, how does that sit with the Government's anti-poverty strategy?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman raises a very specific and very concerning constituency matter. It is Department for Work and Pensions oral questions on Monday, and he may well wish to raise that specific point then. On universal credit more generally, what I can say is that the Government really have listened. This is an attempt to ensure that universal credit provides a good solution for people that combines six previous benefits into one, that improves access to childcare and that enables people to keep more of what they earn as

they move into work. We have raised the value of advances so that people can get 100% of their first month's payment up front if they need to and then return it over 12 months. We have introduced an overlap for those already receiving housing benefit to ensure a smooth transition on to the new system. Really importantly, universal credit is expected to boost employment by 250,000 because it is a simpler system that makes sure that work always pays.

**Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Hafod Hardware, a family run high street shop in Rhayader in my constituency, recently received national and international notoriety by taking on the big-hitting supermarkets and producing the ultimate heart-warming Christmas advert for the production cost of just £7. I strongly recommend all Members go online to look at it. May we have a debate on how we promote our independent high street shops, showing that, through sheer imagination and ingenuity, David really can take on Goliath?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I congratulate Hafod Hardware on its Christmas advert. It just goes to show the kind of entrepreneurial spirit that exists in our small businesses. The Government's new industrial strategy aims to support businesses such as Hafod Hardware to prosper and to grow, so that they can compete with the likes of Moz the Monster with their own successful Christmas campaigns.

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): My constituent Matthew Pounder was served an eviction notice by his letting agent when he chose to switch to a month-by-month contract rather than sign up to a new 12-month tenancy. He later discovered that the letting agents falsely told his landlord that Matthew wanted to leave the property. The agents had attempted to force him out of his home in order to profit from the fees from a new tenancy. May we have a debate on the practice of letting agents such as Philip James in Manchester and how we can strengthen regulations to protect renters?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman rightly raises an important and concerning constituency case. It may be tricky, but he may find a way to raise the issue in DWP questions on Monday. The Government are looking at measures to protect rental tenants better. Draft measures are coming forward and consultations are under way on making sure that people in rented accommodation have protected tenancies and more security about how long they can remain in their homes.

**Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): Good news—more people are getting on their bike in my constituency for work or leisure. That is a good thing because my constituency is very clogged up and polluted. However, a number of my constituents have contacted me about shared spaces—the danger of pedestrians mixing with cyclists and the impact on people with impaired vision. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on road safety?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend always speaks up for her constituents; she is particularly concerned about congestion and a big fan of cycling, so I commend her for her question. She is right to raise the sharing of pavements by cyclists and pedestrians, and I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can talk about her specific concerns in Eastleigh.

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I was recently contacted by five constituents who have told me that the pain infusions that they need to function are being stopped due to Government cuts to East Riding clinical commissioning group, which does not now have the funds to provide them. Please may we have an urgent debate on funding for CCGs to provide therapeutic care so that those people can continue to have some quality of life?

**Andrea Leadsom:** NHS funding will be more than half a trillion pounds from 2015 to 2020. We have record funding for the NHS. We have record numbers of doctors and nurses and more midwives. Last year the NHS treated more people than ever before and the Commonwealth Fund has rated the NHS the No.1 health system in the world for the second time in a row. Record funding is available to the NHS. Where the hon. Lady has specific concerns, she should raise them with Ministers, but she should be in no doubt that the Government are committed to a successful NHS that protects our people, and that the people of this country benefit from the amazing work done by all our NHS staff.

**Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming ID cards for Britain's 2.5 million military veterans? They are a clear step in the right direction. Will she provide time for a debate on our veterans and the armed forces covenant?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend is a strong supporter of veterans, and I commend him for his work as the treasurer of the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces covenant. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has said, those who have served deserve recognition of the sacrifice that they have made throughout their lives, and we will continue to make sure that they get it. As part of the Government's commitment, the veterans card will ensure that the public can recognise our heroes when they seek specific support such as health care, housing and services in the charitable sector.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): Tonight Cardiff will be designated officially a music city. I congratulate the Womanby street campaign and others, and my colleagues in Cardiff on that achievement. When my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) introduces his ten-minute rule Bill on 10 January, will the Leader of the House take a look at it and consider giving it Government time to ensure that other parts of the country can benefit from great music venues?

**Andrea Leadsom:** Music brings enormous pleasure right across the UK, and I congratulate Cardiff on its opportunity to celebrate musical achievements. I am not completely familiar with the events to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but I wish Cardiff every success. I will of course, as always, look closely at the ten-minute Bill.

**Joan Ryan** (Enfield North) (Lab): Enfield is fortunate to benefit from three local theatres, the Millfield, the Chickenshed and the Dugdale—indeed, I will be taking my grandchildren to the Millfield to enjoy “Dick Whittington” over the Christmas period. Such local

[Joan Ryan]

facilities are very important. May we have an early debate in Government time about how the Government's deep cuts to local authorities have affected the ability of arts venues to provide these events and programmes for local people?

**Andrea Leadsom:** First, I congratulate all those who are taking part in those plays at Christmas time. The pantomime is such good fun—my family continues to enjoy it.

**Chris Bryant:** Oh no it's not.

**Andrea Leadsom:** It's behind you.

It is important that we continue to enjoy and support these local venues, and the arts are a vital part of a thriving UK economy. The right hon. Lady will be pleased to know that there are Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions next week. She will be able to raise the issue of how this Government continue to support the arts—as we do—and she will have the chance, before Christmas, to put her questions to Ministers.

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): May we have a debate on the need for Lucy's law, which was launched by the all-party parliamentary dog advisory welfare group last week? The law seeks to ban third-party puppy sales and to end the unimaginable horrors of puppy farming. Lucy was a little black spaniel who was puppy-farmed and, sadly, died.

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this issue. We are a nation of animal lovers. As Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Secretary, I was pleased to change the rules on puppy licensing, and it is incredibly important that we continue to do everything we can to enhance our already very high standards of animal welfare.

**Ged Killen** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Like many on both sides of the House, I am becoming increasingly concerned about the impact of Government policies on the mental health of my constituents—especially those who are moving on to universal credit over Christmas. May we have a debate in Government time on the impact of Government policy on mental health?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman is right that mental health is a key issue across the United Kingdom. He will be pleased to know that around 1,400 more people are accessing mental health services every day, compared with 2010—that is up 40%. There has been a fivefold increase in the number of people accessing talking therapies since 2010, and spending on mental health has increased to a record £11.6 billion. There is a long way to go, and I was delighted to see the Government's launch of the Green Paper on mental health only last week. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will want to take part in that discussion and to provide his input into it.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): This week, the humanitarian organisation the Enough Project published a detailed report outlining the Government of Sudan's

continued oppression of religious minorities and support for extremist groups. The report highlighted that, despite the Sudan Government's claims of improving human rights, there is an ongoing campaign of violent state-led attacks against Christians, Sufi Muslims and other minority groups. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement on this matter?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman raises a very serious issue about human rights and particularly the rights of different religious groups. As ever, I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate on the important points he raises.

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): There is hurt and bewilderment among many disabled people about the extraordinary statement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer that one reason for Britain's low productivity figures is the excessive number of disabled people in the workforce. That is the reverse of the truth, because every disabled person who comes from benefits into full-time work improves our productivity figures. When can we have a debate to celebrate the great work of all Governments and the European Union in increasing opportunities for disabled people to get into the workforce, and to thank those people for their heroic contributions to our economy?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman raises a really important point about the contribution disabled people make to our economy. I am absolutely delighted to thank and praise them from the Dispatch Box for the contribution that they make. We have seen over 600,000 more disabled people in work over the past three years, with 3.5 million people who have disabilities now in work. This Government have a proud record of supporting them and encouraging them.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Following yesterday's victory in Parliament on the meaningful vote, will the Leader of the House make time available for a DExEU Minister to come to the House in advance of that meaningful vote to set out the impact assessment that they will have conducted on the impact of Brexit according to the deal that will have been secured with the European Union?

**Andrea Leadsom:** As ever, the right hon. Gentleman uses terms that I personally would not use. There will be ample opportunities for him to raise any questions that he has about the UK's arrangements as we seek to leave the EU with the best possible deal for all of the United Kingdom and for our EU friends and neighbours. That is what the Government are determined to do to fulfil the result of the referendum that took place last year and took the very clear decision that the UK will be leaving the European Union.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, I attended an event as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on social enterprise with Chris White, the former Member for Warwick and Leamington. I mentioned this to the current MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), earlier. Chris's report, "Our Money, Our Future" reviews the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, which he took through Parliament. It recommended extending,

strengthening and embedding social value, including extending it to this place. May I ask the Leader of the House for time to debate the implementation of the Act, Chris's review, and social value on the parliamentary estate?

**Andrea Leadsom:** That sounds like a very interesting report. I have not seen it myself, but the hon. Gentleman is right to raise it. We do need to look at ways to ensure that we get the best value for the public purse. I encourage him, in the first instance, to seek an Adjournment debate.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I recently received notification from the Post Office that its branch in Sutton Way in my constituency is closing. I understand that it was aware that the branch was closing for almost a year, but it gave me and my constituents only three weeks' notice of this. To rub salt into the wound, it also asked me if I had any idea who might be interested in taking over the branch. This is no way to run a business, let alone a public service that many people rely on. May we have a debate on the competence and accountability of those running the Post Office?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am genuinely very sorry to hear that. I think it is unusual. Usually with post office closures, all Members receive very good prior notice, including specific requests for suggestions on who might be interested in taking over. Quite often, we as MPs are in a position to suggest such individuals. The hon. Gentleman may be interested to know that next Wednesday there is a debate on post office closures in Westminster Hall. He may wish to take part in that.

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): One in 10 fathers suffer with post-natal depression, and the suicide rate rapidly increases in men between the ages of 30 and 43 after having a child. My constituent Mark Williams from Ogmore Vale has been campaigning on these subjects, and he is an inspirational speaker. Will the Leader of the House find time for a Government debate to bring new light on to this area of mental health, which has a real impact on fathers right across the UK?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am absolutely sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman's point. In fact, I may even have heard a speech by the gentleman he mentions. I care passionately

about the subject of pre-natal, peri-natal and post-natal depression of mothers and fathers, which can have an extremely profound impact on the future long-term mental health of their child. I positively encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek a Back-Bench debate on this subject, because there are Members right across the House who take a big interest in early years.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Leader of the House will be aware of industrial action by driving examiners this week and the concerns of many that the management at the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency are refusing to negotiate to resolve the dispute. May we have a debate or a statement to allow Members of this House to hold DVSA management to account and ask the Department of Transport to intervene in this matter?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman may well wish to take that up directly with Department for Transport Ministers. He will recognise that a debate on the subject would be very helpful to try to move things forward if good ideas are suggested by Members of Parliament. Nevertheless, it would be for Ministers to intervene if intervention is necessary.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): The people of eastern Ghouta, in Syria, were subject to horrific sarin nerve agent attacks in 2013 that killed 1,700 people. Since then, around 400,000 civilians have suffered constant artillery bombardment, a blockade of food and medical aid and the blocking of medical evacuations. May I ask for a statement from the Foreign Secretary on the representations that he is making to the Syrian regime to help the people of eastern Ghouta and on what further efforts can be taken to secure much-needed peace in the area?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The Government have shown our very strong commitment to sharing in finding a solution to the problems of Syria and providing aid to alleviate the suffering of so many who have been displaced or driven away altogether into neighbouring countries. I think we can be proud of our contribution, but the hon. Gentleman may well wish to raise the matter in an Adjournment debate, so that he can speak directly to Ministers.

## Violence in Rakhine State

### FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

#### *Select Committee statement*

**Mr Speaker:** We now come to the Select Committee statement. The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), will speak on his subject for up to 10 minutes, during which time no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and I shall, of course, call the hon. Gentleman to respond to those questions in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions, and should be brief. Those on the Front Bench may take part in questioning.

11.46 am

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): It is a great privilege and a huge pleasure to be able to give the first Select Committee statement in this Parliament. We are delegated by the House to investigate foreign affairs, and we are reporting back to the House on our findings.

It is worth noting that the Foreign Affairs Committee chose to publish its first report of this Parliament on the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya population of northern Rakhine, in Burma, having heard some of the most harrowing testimony from witnesses. The situation has rightly drawn the attention of Members from all parts of the House. The hon. Members for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), for Newport West (Paul Flynn), for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith), for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) and for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), as well as my hon. Friends the Members for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) and for Colchester (Will Quince), have taken a very personal interest in the issue. I pay particular tribute to hon. Members who have visited Cox's Bazar and other parts of the refugee community in Bangladesh to hear directly from the victims.

Because of the testimony that the Committee received, we were able to be clear that the violence against the Rohingya is ethnic cleansing, and that it may also constitute crimes against humanity and even genocide. We are pleased that the Government's initial equivocation about the term has been clarified and that the Minister for Asia and the Pacific, the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) has been very clear that the almost 650,000 people who have crossed the border into Bangladesh since August were driven out by the Burmese authorities. The displacement of that great number is a compelling sign of a desperate population, and the traumatic experiences that they have described are reminiscent of infamous atrocities elsewhere.

In the face of such abuse, we must ask what the 2005 UN resolution on the responsibility to protect, which we agreed, requires of us. The first requirement must surely be that the UK Government conduct their own legal analysis. Such analysis from a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council—and, indeed, the penholder on Burma—would help to shape international understanding of the issue and structure a global response. That is needed today more than ever.

Research by Médecins sans Frontières found that at least 9,000 Rohingya died in Myanmar—or Burma—between 25 August and 24 September. The charity states that

“in the most conservative estimations”

at least 6,700 of those deaths, including those of at least 730 children under the age of five, were caused by violence. That suggests that the operation conducted by the Burmese military was brutal enough to raise the possibility of taking a case to the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity. Along with such brutality, we heard reports of sexual violence being used, and we welcome the mission of Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Pramila Patten, who is expected to be in Naypyidaw and Yangon this week. We should welcome, too, the actions taken by the United Nations Human Rights Council, in holding a special session to hear about the degradation and treatment of minorities in Burma, and the words of Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein: that we could be witnessing a genocide. Those build on the achievements of our own representatives in the UN to secure a very strong presidential statement last month.

Burma's response to this growing body of evidence—or, indeed, evidence of bodies—has been exceptionally poor. Setting up another commission when previous recommendations have been ignored is not good enough. The Annan commission was clear, and we call for its recommendations to be implemented in full. That is why the Committee calls on the UK to consider sanctions on individuals connected with the military regime and particularly on the commander-in-chief, General Min Aung Hlaing. Although sanctions are an imperfect tool, it is wrong for the UK to continue engagement with Burma with no demonstration of censure; General Min Aung Hlaing's responsibility in particular cannot be ignored.

The UK, of course, bears some responsibility for seeking to turn international outrage into tangible action, and improvements on the ground should not be hamstrung by China's veto in the Security Council; they should focus on regional forums and allies to achieve results. In seeking regional co-operation, the Committee recognised, supported and welcomed the efforts of my right hon. Friend the Minister, whom I am glad to see in his place on the Treasury Bench.

The Committee noted with sadness the echoing silence of State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. Although she is clearly constrained by a lack of control over the military and by strong domestic public opinion, to see a voice for freedom, democracy and the rule of law choose not to speak out in the face of such crimes does more than allow them to continue; it suggests acquiescence at some level and a failure of leadership at every level. She remains a better option than the alternatives, perhaps, and perhaps the only option for the future, but she is now deeply compromised.

Finally, Bangladesh deserves praise and material support for accommodating well over half a million new refugees this year. The British Government also deserve credit for their quick and generous provision of aid. Although return must be the ambition, we noted that that can happen only when humanitarian access is possible to Rakhine state. We are also concerned that the camps in Bangladesh should not become permanent, leaving people exposed to radicalisation and storing up problems for the future.

As the Committee noted, this crisis was sadly predictable—indeed, the Foreign Office did predict it. But the Foreign Office's own warning system did not raise enough alarm; in recent years, there was too much focus from the United Kingdom and others on supporting the democratic transition and not enough on atrocity prevention, as was set out by former Foreign Secretary Lord Hague during his term of office.

A tough and unwelcome message to the Burmese Government about the Rohingya was not delivered early enough, although I welcome the fact that the Minister did send such a message recently. He was commendably candid about the Foreign Office's need to reflect, and it must now learn lessons about atrocity prevention from the crisis, to apply not only in Burma but elsewhere.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I know of your long-standing interest in this issue, which you demonstrated when you were on the Back Benches.

The report is excellent. As it mentions, some of the refugees may be very reluctant to return to Burma given the treatment they have received. To what extent did the Foreign Affairs Committee consider alternatives to either Burma or Bangladesh? Did it feel that there was support from within the Rohingya community for being moved to somewhere else completely?

**Tom Tugendhat:** The Committee did look at alternatives, but it was very focused on the ability to return to Burma; we did not seek, of course, to allow the Burmese Government an opt-out through which they could permanently displace these people and force others to take responsibility for their brutality. Although the Committee was absolutely aware that return could happen only when it was properly supervised and when humanitarian access to Rakhine state was possible, we did not emphasise the point about third party displacement.

**Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Does my hon. and gallant Friend agree that one of the main things that could be done would be to send the United Nations special envoy to Rakhine state to help those people who are still there and get back those who are displaced? Would that not be a really good move on the part of the UN?

**Tom Tugendhat:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right and I welcome her support on this. We looked at the UN action, and in welcoming the Annan commission we welcome that particular suggestion as well.

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Gentleman is deeply grateful to his hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) that, by the form of her reference to him, she promoted him to the status of a military general.

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee for the way in which he has chaired the Committee in his first few months in that position, and, indeed, the Minister for the candid way in which he presented the case of the UK Government when he gave evidence to the Committee.

Does my hon. Friend the Chair of the Committee agree that this again shows the bluntness of the UN,

and shows that it does not have enough tools available to it to deal with these kinds of international crises?

**Tom Tugendhat:** My hon. Friend—I do refer to him as a friend—and fellow Committee member speaks very clearly and identifies his own views on the UN. We have not yet looked into this subject, and as I am responding on a particular report it would not be appropriate for me to stray into the structure of the UN. However, I urge the Minister to work through the UN system to make sure that reports such as that of the Annan commission are fully implemented, which it will be remembered from our time in the Committee we all supported.

**Ms Nusrat Ghani** (Wealden) (Con): My right hon. Friend will recall that the evidence we took on the awful nature of the human rights abuses and humanitarian crisis was in stark contrast to the letter sent to the Committee by the Burmese embassy, which contradicted all the evidence we took. Does my right hon. Friend—*[Interruption.]*—or, rather, my hon. Friend, agree that the underlying problem is that the Burmese authorities and Aung San Suu Kyi have denied citizenship to the Rohingya, and we and our international partners must push them to make sure the Rohingya are given the right to remain in their homeland?

**Tom Tugendhat** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Gentleman has now been referred to as both a military general and a Privy Counsellor; his cup runneth over.

**Tom Tugendhat:** Today is indeed my lucky day—Christmas and Easter have come at once—but despite those promotions I will address my hon. Friend's question, because it is extremely important. She is of course right to say that the refusal of citizenship to this population has been one of the great abuses. Although they were citizens, certainly in the 1950s and '60s, their citizenship was effectively removed from them by the 1980s, and the Annan commission is very clear that citizenship must be restored. That is one of the reasons we were so clear—as my hon. Friend will remember from our discussions—in insisting that the Annan commission recommendations are implemented in full.

**Ann Clwyd** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee; it has been a very interesting Committee to serve on, and I thank him for the way in which he has conducted this inquiry. I want to ask him in particular about the need to find a way to open access to Rakhine province, including in respect of any process of repatriation, because we must be very concerned about the lack of access and scrutiny, and the news of the arrests of two Reuters journalists believed to be attempting to report on the situation there. The UK Government and others in the international community must find a way to ensure that there is independent monitoring and oversight of what is happening in Rakhine province, especially in connection with repatriation.

**Tom Tugendhat:** I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend. As is being evidenced this morning, it is a pleasure to chair this Committee, with such experts and intelligent

[Tom Tugendhat]

and supportive friends serving on it. My right hon. Friend is of course right that an essential part of the Government's duty now is to make sure access is possible. I welcome the efforts of my right hon. Friend the Minister in seeking that when he has been working with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and other regional organisations. I also welcome the support he has given to the United Nations, and we of course discussed in Committee making sure the UN had that access.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): I visited the Kutupalong Rohingya refugee camp near Cox's Bazar last month. It is now equivalent in size to the city of Bristol, but it has no hospital and has inadequate roads and very few schools. It was described by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees as the most congested camp it had experienced anywhere in the world in the past 15 years. Page 32 of my hon. Friend's report highlights the fact that ethnic cleansing has not been recognised as an independent crime under international law. Is he, like me, surprised and disappointed by that? Will he encourage Her Majesty's Government to change that situation?

**Tom Tugendhat:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I welcome his call for ethnic cleansing to be defined as a separate crime. The approximately 550,000 people in Kutupalong demonstrate that this is not only a crime of the past, but that it is very much having an effect in the present. I welcome his efforts and personal courage in going there, which has enabled him to report back to the House.

**Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): I returned from Cox's Bazar on Monday. I commend what is generally an excellent report: every word of it has value. The real issue concerns the return of refugees to Myanmar-Burma. That is not possible under present circumstances. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the need now is for genuine humanitarian assistance, not just from the Department for International Development but by mobilising the whole world to make sure we are treating the situation with the gravity it deserves?

**Tom Tugendhat:** I hear the hon. Gentleman's comments on a regional response, because that is an essential part of this. The work of Her Majesty's Government in putting up money initially will only go so far and it is unreasonable to expect that they could bear the entire burden. The work the Minister is doing regionally should be welcomed. He has been visiting partners and neighbours to make sure there is a regional response to what is, frankly, a regional problem.

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): Visiting the camp was an overwhelming and heartbreaking experience. I believe that, having met the refugees who have suffered the worst experiences life has to offer, all of us have a sense of duty to make sure they do not become invisible. I congratulate the Chairman on a very good report. It is realistic and does not offer any facile solutions. May I suggest that the only long-term answer to their problems—certainly more aid is needed; the situation is pitiful at the moment even though a great deal is being done—is

for them to return to their lands in Myanmar? The only way to do that is to give an absolutely cast-iron guarantee of having armed forces with them. The British Army has a fine record in operations of this kind.

**Tom Tugendhat:** The hon. Gentleman—my hon. Friend; he has been a dear friend for many years—makes some very good points. I certainly welcome his call that we must support the returning refugees. The Committee makes the clear case for humanitarian access being essential before any refugees can return. We were very cautious, for various historical legacy reasons and the misunderstandings that could arise, about recommending that Her Majesty's Government send British soldiers. However, we raised with the Minister—he was extremely receptive to it—the idea of regional support, whether under the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or the United Nations, and some sort of alert force or even support force to be there with the refugees as they return.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I congratulate my plain hon. Friend on this excellent report. Further to that question, Myanmar is not a member of the Commonwealth, but does he think there is a role for Commonwealth countries, not least those close to Myanmar, to advise, help and support, so that these instances do not happen in the future and that we can get over the current tragedy soon?

**Tom Tugendhat:** I am sure my hon. Friend joins me in the sadness we feel that Burma is not currently able to seek re-admittance to the Commonwealth because of these very tragic events that, sadly, she has done nothing to prevent. There is of course a role for the Commonwealth in the region and more widely. We should also welcome the words of Archbishop Tutu in condemning the silence of the State Counsellor. Frankly, it is only voices like his that carry a weight that is equal to hers.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): We welcome the report from the Foreign Affairs Committee and agree with the conclusion that any repatriation must be safe and voluntary. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, to ensure that there is no repatriation that does not meet these conditions, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees must have access on both sides of the border?

**Tom Tugendhat:** The hon. Lady makes an extremely valid point. Of course, we called in this report for absolute access in various areas, and for the special representative of the Secretary-General—Special Representative Patten—to have access, as she is expected to do this week, to the capital. But that needs to go further. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that the representatives of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees need access on the ground, not just with the Government.

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): I commend the hon. Gentleman and his Committee for the excellent report. My Scottish National party colleagues and I agree with the Committee that the UK bears significant responsibility for the international failure effectively to respond to the crisis, considering the UK's role on the UN Security Council. Does he agree that the UK

Government need to suspend their military assistance programme to end their military ties to the Burmese region?

**Tom Tugendhat:** I not only agree with the hon. Lady; I welcome the fact that the Government have already done so.

**Mr Speaker:** I think that I speak for the House in thanking the hon. Gentleman and his Committee very warmly for their ongoing work, for this report, for the hon. Gentleman's statement to the House today and for his courteous and comprehensive responses to questions.

## Point of Order

12.6 pm

**Joan Ryan** (Enfield North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I fear that I inadvertently misled the House during business questions, when I suggested that right hon. and hon. Members could enjoy the pantomime of "Dick Whittington" at the Millfield theatre this Christmas. In fact, that was the last pantomime that I saw there. If hon. Members wish to attend the Millfield theatre this year, it will be to enjoy "Jack and the Beanstalk".

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for that extremely helpful clarification. Moreover, in the process of offering that clarification to the House, the right hon. Lady has served further to highlight the important work done by, and the continued pleasure brought about by, the theatre, which I believe to be in her constituency.

**Joan Ryan:** The theatre is in my borough; it serves my constituency.

**Mr Speaker:** We now know that the important work of this theatre is in the London Borough of Enfield, for which I think both the theatre and the borough will be eternally grateful.

## Backbench Business

### Pension Equality for Women

[*Relevant document: e-petition 200088, entitled “Make fair transitional state pension arrangements for 1950’s women”.*]

12.8 pm

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to publish proposals to provide a non-means tested bridging solution for all women born on or after 6 April 1950 who are affected by changes to the State Pension age in the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, and the sponsors who have supported me in the application for it. I also thank the WASPI campaign nationally, which is well represented in the Gallery. Its members are involved in protests and demonstrations outside the Palace in support of their legitimate claims.

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all his work on the issue. As he says, a lot of WASPI campaigners are listening to the debate in the Gallery, so does he think that this would be an opportune time for the Minister to apologise for the crass remark he made in Westminster Hall that WASPI women could get modern apprenticeships?

**Grahame Morris:** I will come on to the Minister’s remarks in that debate, but if he did want to take the opportunity, I am sure that the WASPI women would welcome it.

What we and the campaign are asking for, as set out in the motion, is simple: a non-means-tested bridging pension. That would mean that some 3.8 million women would not have to live in poverty. The pension would be paid as a percentage of the full state pension, with compensation offered over the period between the age of 60 and the new state pension age.

**Norman Lamb** (North Norfolk) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. We all agree that this injustice needs to be dealt with, but should we not also consider how that could be funded? I have discovered from the House of Commons Library that bringing forward the proposed increase in the pension age from 67 to 68 from 2037 to 2036 would in itself raise approximately £7.5 billion, which would go a considerable way towards helping these women to address the injustice that they face.

**Grahame Morris:** I am grateful for that intervention. I shall come to some of the proposals that have been made and how the injustice might be addressed.

**Joan Ryan** (Enfield North) (Lab): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does he agree that it is shocking and unacceptable that the WASPI campaigners have had to work so tirelessly to get absolutely no response from the Government?

**Grahame Morris:** I completely agree. We have debated this issue many times—perhaps 29 or 30—in the Chamber and Westminster Hall, and we have been incredibly active over the past few months. Early-day motion 63

has 195 signatures, while an e-petition that was laid before Parliament attracted 109,000 signatures, and that number continues to grow. A Westminster Hall debate was so oversubscribed that some Members were sitting on the window ledges.

**Derek Twigg** (Halton) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and his tireless work in supporting this cause. I certainly support the call for fair transitional state pension arrangements for all WASPI women, but a number of options have been suggested. Will my hon. Friend be dealing with those in his speech?

**Grahame Morris:** Absolutely. There are a number of options. There are things that the Minister could do immediately to mitigate and alleviate the worst hardship that is being suffered. This is a matter of concern throughout the House, as is demonstrated by the number of signatures to the early-day motion, and representations have been made from every UK nation and region, as well as every political party in the House.

**Mr George Howarth** (Knowsley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is doing a good job in making his case, but may I put to him the words of a retired teacher from Knowsley who was born in July 1954? She says:

“The boy I sat next to in school was born in November 1953. We left school at the same time and began to pay our NI and income tax at the same time but he receives his state pension on his 65th birthday. I have to wait 10 months beyond my 65th birthday. How can that be fair”.

Does she not sum up the position very well?

**Grahame Morris:** Absolutely. I am sure that Members on both sides of the House can give many examples of WASPI women who have come to their surgeries, written to them and sent them e-mails. Every day I receive heartbreaking letters and e-mails from women in my constituency and further afield who have been suffering extreme hardship.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I am proud to be a co-signatory of the motion. So far the hon. Gentleman has referred only to WASPI but, as we know, there is an awful lot of interest in this whole issue, and only some of the groups involved call themselves WASPI. We are actually talking about all the women born in the 1950s who are suffering from an injustice that has been disproportionately inflicted on them as a result of changes to the pension qualification age.

**Grahame Morris:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I welcome the contribution that he has made to the campaign.

**Mark Tami** (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for all the hard work that he has put in. I am sure that he, like me, has come across many women who have based all their retirement plans—their partners may have already retired—on what they were told, and assumed, would be their retirement age. They all say to me, “It is just not fair.”

**Grahame Morris:** I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Many of these women have worked since they were 16. They signed up to a deal that they considered to be an

agreement with the Government, but that deal has been cast aside with little or no regard for their financial circumstances.

**Ian Austin** (Dudley North) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing the debate. A moment ago, he used the word “heartbreaking”, and it genuinely is heartbreaking to listen to women—as I have in Dudley and the Black country—who had to retire early to care for a relative, or in some cases a husband, and were subsequently widowed. They are left with no income and face the prospect of having to wait much longer for the pension on the basis of which they had planned their whole future. Does my hon. Friend agree that particular attention must be paid to women in that position?

**Grahame Morris:** Absolutely. There are things that the Minister and the Government can do immediately. We are unnecessarily creating a generation of women in which many now rely on food banks. Some are being forced to sell their homes and to rely on the benefits system, which is degrading for them.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Does my comrade agree that we should praise the role of the trade union movement in supporting the WASPI women? WASPI campaigners in Glasgow and north Lanarkshire are watching a live broadcast of this debate in the Glasgow city Unison office. One of them is my constituent Kathy McDonald, who has worked for 40 years—since she was 15—but now has to go on working until she is 66.

**Grahame Morris:** Absolutely. This huge injustice affects all nations and regions of the United Kingdom. These are hard-working, decent women who have contributed through the national insurance fund and expected to receive their state pension.

**Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods** (City of Durham) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for securing the debate, and for all the work that he does in support of the WASPI campaign and others. Does he agree that many of these women are being dealt with very inappropriately by both jobcentres and the benefits system?

A lady who came to my surgery last week had just been made redundant from the Walkers crisps factory. She has a full employment and contribution record, but she is really fearful about what will happen to her over the next few years. Will she be forced into inappropriate work? She does not know what benefits she will get. She is really stressed. Given her full contribution record, should she not benefit from proper transitional arrangements? Women should not be treated in this way.

**Grahame Morris:** That case is doubly relevant to me. The Walkers crisps factory in my constituency is closing this week—just before Christmas—and 400 people will lose their jobs. Many of them are long-serving employees who have worked hard. Some are in their late 50s and early 60s, and had expected to receive their state pensions.

**Mike Hill** (Hartlepool) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend and neighbour for giving way. I take great pleasure in praising him for his work on behalf of the WASPI women. Some 5,500 women in my constituency

have suffered because of the Government’s lack of action. Some have been forced to go to food banks, and in all cases the women feel victimised.

**Grahame Morris:** These women are disadvantaged in a number of ways, and Members might not realise how many. For instance, people have raised with me the issue of free bus passes. Many women who live outside London—in regions such as the north-east and the south-west—do not drive, and without those bus passes, they cannot travel.

**Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): May I ask the hon. Gentleman and other Labour Members how much fuss they made when Gordon Brown introduced this change?

**Grahame Morris:** We need to address where we are now—[*Interruption.*] Well, the hon. Lady asked a question. Do we think that the change was wrong? I think that the 1995 changes were incorrect. Under the Pensions Act 2011, those changes—they were originally spread over a longer period—were expedited, and the former Pensions Minister, Steve Webb, has elaborated on that point.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for his speech. To clarify, the Pensions Act 1995 was introduced by a Tory Government, while the Pensions Act 2011 was put through by a Tory-Lib Dem coalition. Why the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) referred to Gordon Brown is a mystery.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Grahame Morris:** I will give way to the Minister.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman):** The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) will be aware that in 2007, after 10 years of a Labour Government, the then Government considered all matters of pensions legislation and passed the Pensions Act 2007. During their 13 years in power Labour Members had total capacity to do something about what they now say is not appropriate. With respect, there is a legitimate point to answer.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Grahame Morris:** I will give way again in a minute, but I would like the opportunity to respond to the Minister’s point. We must recognise the injustice faced by these women, because there were many missed opportunities. There is no doubt that the 2011 Act accelerated the changes, and Steve Webb, the former Pensions Minister, is quoted extensively as indicating that. When he wrote to the WASPI women on behalf of the coalition Government, he not only informed them about the change in pension age of one year, as under the 2011 Act, but informed them for the first time about the earlier changes, meaning that some people’s state pension retirement age was being extended by six years.

**Mhairi Black** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): As someone who was one year old when the 1995 Act came into effect but is sitting here just like everybody

[Mhairi Black]

else, may I ask all Members that we get past the party political nonsense of whose fault this is? The mess has been going on for long enough and the current Government are in charge now. This problem is not going away, and the Government need to deal with it.

**Grahame Morris:** Absolutely, and there are things that the Government could do immediately to mitigate the worst cases of hardship. For example, the winter fuel allowance can be worth up to £300. If the Minister is looking for suggestions, that would be a decent start. If the Government were to give the WASPI women that payment each year, they would be able to have some level of comfort during this cold winter weather, but many in my region are having to choose between heating and eating.

**Mr Mark Prisk** (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the problems date all the way back to 1995 under three or more Governments. Does he agree with many of my constituents who feel that this issue is as much to do with communication as policy? Many of my constituents who are affected tell me that if they had known the effects of the changes in time, they would have been able to respond to them.

**Grahame Morris:** The hon. Gentleman makes a completely reasonable point. I am sure there is common cause across the House—I am looking at the Minister and hoping that common sense can prevail—and there must be an acknowledgement that there was poor communication. I am sure that the Minister is aware that a collective action is being taken by the WASPI women through Bindmans solicitors, and there could be a case of maladministration if the matter is found in their favour.

**Bill Wiggin** (North Herefordshire) (Con): I have been listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman and he seems to know what he is talking about. Can he give an idea of how much this will cost? I suspect that there is a range of amounts, but I am curious to know what he thinks would be the right amount of money that could go some way towards putting this right.

**Grahame Morris:** I think there are things that the Government and the Minister could do immediately, and I will come to those a little later—I have set out my suggestions in a sequential way, and they include immediately extending pensions credit to the group. I do not have the costings for that—[*Interruption.*] My colleagues on the Front Bench inform me that it is £800 million. We could do things with the winter fuel allowance or bus passes, which would offer immediate help to these women.

I alluded to the fundamental point made by the former Pensions Minister, Steve Webb, who said:

“The 2011 Act, which I was responsible for, did not add any more than 18 months to people’s pension age, typically 12 months. But when we did write to people—and we did write to them to tell them what changes we have made—this was the first time they had heard about the first changes. So instead of me writing to them to tell them there was an extra year on the pension age, we were effectively telling them they had six extra years added to their pension age, which is of course why they were outraged”.

Hopefully, we are having a sensible, constructive and meaningful debate, but we should make no mistake—there is real hardship and outrage out there.

**John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is setting out his case beautifully and I congratulate him on securing this debate. As someone who represents a retirement town, many local constituents have raised this issue with me. Most of them have a slightly different point of view and do not object to the principle of the equalisation of pension age at all—indeed, they think it is just and right. They are upset because they say they were not properly advised and did not have time to plan for the changes early enough in their working careers. That is the injustice that those who speak to me feel most strongly.

**Grahame Morris:** Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman, with typical alacrity, has hit the nail on the head. Nevertheless, there is an injustice that must be rectified, and the Government need to do that.

**Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman contend that the changes in 1995 were wrong, or were the changes in 2011 wrong? Many people I have met feel that the 2011 changes were too rapid.

**Grahame Morris:** The fundamental point, which has also been made by Government Members, is the lack of notice about the 1995 changes, and in some cases, the failure to give any notice at all. There is an issue of communication. A number of groups are campaigning on this issue, and there is a general acceptance of the need to equalise state retirement pension age—I do not think there is dispute about that and we are in agreement on it. The issue is the phasing, and the acceleration of that phasing in of the original changes in 1995.

**Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a marvellous speech and I do not want to disagree with him. Does he agree, however, that the equalisation of the pension age for this group of women is not fair? In the era in which they worked, many were responsible for the children and had to undermine their career; they had lower wages and did not make allowances for their pensions. Some have since suffered divorce or a break up, and many of those who come to me in Swansea are becoming impoverished because of this change. It is all very well imagining a future utopian world where there is equal opportunity that justifies an equal pension age, but that is not what has happened to these women. It is quite wrong to say that this issue is just about how they were told about the changes.

**Grahame Morris:** Absolutely. These women are falling off the edge of a cliff owing to the lack of transitional relief. There are many examples of women who made plans to retire at 60 to care for elderly relatives, and of women who worked in arduous, physically demanding employment who really cannot work beyond 60. This huge injustice affects 3.8 million women in this country, and it really needs to be addressed.

**Mr Howarth:** My hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. To support that point, I shall quote a woman from Knowsley who was born in June 1955:

“My elderly mother had a stroke and I subsequently became her full-time carer. The last 10 years of her life were particularly difficult as she needed 24-hour care, provided by me. My own health has suffered greatly due to the added pressure and I now find myself unable to work due to ill-health and, at an age when I should now be receiving my state pension, I am forced to attend regular appointments at the DWP and medicals to ascertain my entitlement to ESA. This is soul destroying”.

**Grahame Morris:** Absolutely, and I am sure that every—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. Before the hon. Gentleman responds to that intervention, I must make it clear that I am making no criticism of him. He is making a very genuine speech and has a great many points to cover, and he has taken a lot of interventions. I do, however, criticise those people who have made interventions but are not remaining in the Chamber for the rest of the debate. The convention is that the hon. Gentleman introducing the debate should speak for approximately 15 minutes. So far, the hon. Gentleman has had a great deal more than that, but I am not blaming him. He has been very decent in taking interventions from other people, which is good for the pace of the debate, but those who make interventions and then just leave the Chamber are preventing some of the other 32 people who have indicated that they wish to speak from having the chance to do so. So I am asking for a bit of honour. There are to be no more interventions unless they are from people who are going to remain for the whole debate, and the hon. Gentleman ought to bring his remarks to a conclusion soon. However, I am not going to pressure him too much. This is not his fault; it is other people’s fault that he is in this position.

**Grahame Morris:** I am grateful for your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will press on as I recognise that many Members wish to speak in the debate.

The Government must understand that this is a time-sensitive issue and, as has been said, we need to work cross-party to find a solution. If the Government are unable to do that, they will be letting down a generation of women who are being denied a fair deal on their state pension. In Easington, 4,542 women are affected, and the campaign is looking for justice, not just warm words. The suggestion from my own Front Benchers of early access to a pension credit is a good start, and that could be done immediately, but as a stand-alone option it does not take into account the fact that all the 1950s women have suffered maladministration and loss of income, and that they all deserve recompense.

The cost-neutral suggestion put forward by other hon. Members of an actuarially reduced pension for life asks the women who have been discriminated against to bear the cost of putting right the mistake that was not their fault in the first place. It also condemns women to retirement in pensioner poverty, with all its problems of greater reliance on benefits. Arrangements that address only the additional state pension age increases imposed by the 2011 Act are not good enough. There are also faults with the application of the 1995 Act, and the maladministration suffered by the WASPI women is an issue that the Government are going to have to address sooner or later. The women need recompense, and the Government need to find a solution that will bring relief to all those who are affected.

The Government have repeatedly stated that they are committed to supporting people aged 50 years and over to remain in and return to work. Several policies and initiatives have been put forward to support people to work longer, such as older people’s champions in jobcentres, lifelong learning and apprenticeship opportunities for people of all ages. However, these suggestions completely disregard the issues at the heart of the WASPI campaign. In reality, they are completely unworkable for the majority of WASPI women, as was illustrated by the case highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods).

I was incredibly disappointed that the Budget did not offer any form of help or relief to the WASPI women. I know that some Conservative Members made representations to the Chancellor in all sincerity, and I was disappointed that neither he nor the Prime Minister responded to them. I am rather incredulous that Her Majesty’s Opposition are being attacked for being weak on women’s issues by the Prime Minister. I understand that she herself is a WASPI woman, and I am curious to find out whether she received notification from the DWP about the change in her pension arrangements. Quite simply, women born in the 1950s were not given sufficient notice by the Government that their state retirement age would be increasing. I could go on and give further specific examples, but I do not intend to do so, because I want to leave time for other Members to make contributions. I am sure that they will have examples of their own.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. As I have indicated, a great many people wish to speak, so we will have to start with a time limit of six minutes.

12.36 pm

**Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con):** I thank my north-east colleague, the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), for securing this important debate.

Yesterday, in Parliament, we celebrated the centenary of the formation of the Women’s Royal Naval Service. We celebrated and remembered the service and sacrifice of the women who gave so much to our nation. Today, we are yet again debating the plight of 3.8 million women from across the United Kingdom who have been financially impacted by the lack of notice of pension increases—our WASPI women. Those women have quietly contributed to our nation’s economic growth throughout their working lives in paid work, alongside providing the bedrock on which our families and children depend, through unpaid parental and caring duties, without question. Those women have now created one of the biggest campaigns we have witnessed in many years, because Governments of all colours over two decades have failed them.

As a believer in the power of people peacefully coming together to campaign for change and working together for what they believe is right, I am completely supportive of the WASPI women from across our country, many of whom are here today, including two dedicated and effective campaigners from my own constituency who are leading the campaigning. They are giving up all

[Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan]

their time to voice the concerns of my 6,200 Berwick-upon-Tweed WASPI constituents, the 23,800 WASPI women across Northumberland and the 3,777,000 across our four nations.

In this debate, we need to remember that the WASPI women have served our nation in many different forms and guises. We have military service personnel, teachers, doctors, nurses, mothers, midwives, accountants, farmers, lawyers and office workers—those are just the ones who come to see me in my constituency—and many others who have been the backbone of our nation's economy since they started work in the late 1960s. Those women have provided the building blocks that have taken our country through the strong economic times and the hard. We need to keep them in mind during this debate, not just as one big story, but by remembering the individual story of each WASPI woman who has come to our surgeries with problems of financial hardship.

With that in mind, I would like to reflect on some of the issues faced by my WASPI women living in north Northumberland. People in my patch have a strong and ingrained spirit of independence and self-sufficiency. Perhaps it is a remnant of the border reiver spirit that being on the border of two nations brings, but I sit comfortably with my Scottish friends here today.

A long history of hard work, regardless of weather—of which we have much—remains the hallmark of rural Northumberland. That is particularly clear in the strength of the women who have been to see me. They have raised families alongside a lifetime of hard work and have made sacrifices to ensure that future generations have better lives than previous generations. That last point means that it is hard for some women, who have explained this to me in great detail, to ask for benefits to survive, particularly because they were led to believe that they would be receiving the state pension, into which they had paid, at a certain time, but that has now been altered without due time to prepare.

**Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): I recognise the type of people to whom my hon. Friend is referring. Women out there clearly feel that they have experienced miscommunication, and they are facing genuine hardship, so I ask my hon. Friend to continue her cause.

**Mrs Trevelyan:** I thank my hon. Friend. It is so important that we think of the individual women. There may be 3.8 million of them, but that means 3.8 million individual women across our nations. These women have worked hard all their lives and now face some incredibly difficult circumstances, and ill health can mean that they are struggling to survive on what they have. The lack of notice of changes to their pensionable age means that their financial plans—where they were able to make them—have been thrown entirely out of kilter.

Such issues are exacerbated by the intrinsic problems that people face in rural areas. Job opportunities can be limited, and I have met constituents who face age discrimination when trying to get back into the workplace as a result of the changes. The challenge is compounded by limited or non-existent—as it is many parts of my constituency—rural public transport. Connectivity can be extremely poor for some people who live many miles

from a bus stop. Without a car, many people's options are severely restricted. The personal stories of financial adversity faced by my constituents have been beyond frustrating for me to listen to.

Those of us who brought together the all-party parliamentary group on state pension inequality for women have found the Department for Work and Pensions unwilling to engage with us to try to build a relationship to seek viable and fair solutions for the 3.8 million women. Every case is unique, and each woman's financial situation is different, and we need to treat each one on its merits. I gently suggest to the DWP and to Ministers that that needs to be how we start to treat the women.

Too many women have told me of the inefficiency and inconsistency in the treatment of their cases by the DWP, and I will be most grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), my constituency neighbour and our Pensions Minister, if he tackles today the impasse that this campaign and the Department seem to have reached. I have tried on the behalf of my constituents to bring all the parties together for a considered, open discussion to provide some progress on these historical failings. Sadly, I have so far been unsuccessful.

Whatever the historical failures of communication on the changes to the pension age, and regardless of which Government, of whichever colour, failed to get this right over the past 20 years, the key questions for me are how we now start to work together, listen to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman and tackle the failure to deal with the WASPI women's complaints. We want to ensure that the Department puts in place rigorous processes for the pension age changes that are no doubt to come. I am sure that I will be 80 before I am allowed to retire, and I want to be certain that, whoever is in government, the Department is comfortable that it has robust processes in place so that this situation can never happen again.

Women rarely push themselves forward; they are wont just to get on with life and look after their families. However, this situation has driven them to gather together and speak with one voice on behalf of each other as much as for themselves. It behoves us as their Members of Parliament and the incumbent Government, who have been asked to right historical failings, to listen and to work with my constituents to find a fair and honest solution. I urge the Minister to meet me and my Northumbrian WASPI ladies to start that process in a spirit of conciliation and understanding.

12.43 pm

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): Like many hon. Members, I have taken part in at least seven debates over the past two or three years, and still the Government have not actually done anything about the situation. Nor have they actually listened to what has been said. It is not my intention to rehash all the arguments that have been put over the past seven or eight debates, but we obviously have to congratulate the WASPI women on their tenacity over the past few years and on staying the course, to get justice for themselves. I congratulate the WASPI women from Coventry and the other women who have travelled down here today from all parts of the country, some of whom have had to do so at their own expense.

I want to emphasise just one or two points. The Government had a golden opportunity to do something in the Budget. They could have made some sort of gesture—a halfway house—towards achieving what the WASPI women want, but they totally ignored the situation, while telling the public that they want to listen to their concerns on a whole range of issues. In some ways, the Government have actually used austerity to justify not taking any action on help for WASPI women. If they can spend £50 billion or £60 billion on high-speed rail, I am sure that they could find the money to cover the costs of helping these women.

The WASPI women were not given time to plan for their retirement. That is the tragedy here, and it is important to emphasise that point. Somebody suggested earlier that that was not the real point, but it is. That and finding resolution to the problem are the two main points. It was also suggested that Gordon Brown somehow had something to do with the situation. Well, we all know that that is not true, but we are where we are, so we should not dwell too much on that; suffice it to say that it was the John Major Government who introduced pension age equalisation, so Members should bear that in mind. We should also bear in mind that 53% of the WASPI women actually rely on their pensions to make ends meet. Many of them look after elderly parents. Some of them have children who suffer from disabilities. People tend to forget that many of the women have to look after grown-up children—probably in their 20s. There is an organisation in Coventry that supports such women, but it gets no help whatsoever.

**Ged Killen** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I know that my constituent Anne Potter and all the Glasgow and Lanarkshire WASPI women are watching this debate at home. In addition to what my hon. Friend says about the WASPI women who are in work, does he agree that many of them had to fight for equal pay in work and have worked in highly physically demanding jobs? It is therefore offensive for the Government to suggest that they could simply take up apprenticeships to fill the gap.

**Mr Cunningham:** I will come on to that, because it was suggested in a debate two weeks ago that WASPI women could take up apprenticeships, which just makes me wonder whether the Government are taking this matter seriously.

Let us look at the general situation affecting women and broaden things out a bit. We should not lose sight of the fact that, under this Government, there have been cuts to Sure Start—and this from a Government who claim they want to support women! Let us also look at austerity and at the past couple of Budgets: women have contributed £14 billion through tax adjustments. Just think about that. I am not just talking about the WASPI women; that affects women in general. This Government say that they support women, but when they get the chance to put their money where their mouth is, they do not. Other hon. Members will have had similar cases, but I had a recent case in which a bank was deducting the state pension from people's private pensions. Some Members may well have signed my early-day motion on that topic, which is something that we are going to pursue.

I know that many other Members want to get in, so I will finish by saying that the classic example of this Government's meanness towards women can be seen in the cuts to funding for women's refuges. As we all know, refuges are often a haven for women who have been abused, assaulted and, in some cases, raped, so the Government should start to think about whether they really support women.

12.48 pm

**Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), and I congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing this important debate. I am here to speak on behalf of my North Cornwall WASPI women. I have met them numerous times at different events over the past two and a half years. I presented a petition on their behalf last year, and many of them have come to see me at surgeries in the towns and villages of my constituency to express their concern about the challenging times that many women are facing. Other hon. Members have alluded to some of those challenges today.

Most people who come to see me have worked their entire life. They might well own their own home and not be in a position to make the transition for those 18 months. I support transitional measures for our WASPI women, and I believe we can reach a practical solution by reducing the state pension over a longer period of time. Private pension providers already allow that. The option should be given to people with public pensions.

The changes in 2011 were rushed and wrong. The equalisation of pensions from 1995 was the right thing to do but, with increases of between two months and 18 months, people have suffered in different ways, which we should acknowledge. People should be able to take their pension earlier, or have the option to wait and have the £159 a week, as it currently sits. I have produced some figures, and my benchmarks are based on the current life expectancy for a woman in the UK of 83 and the pension age in 1995 of 66.

At the moment, the state pension is £159.55 a week. Over the 17 years leading up to average life expectancy, the pension would cost just over £141,000. I have done some modelling based on £130 a week, £140 a week and £150 a week for a reduced pension over a longer period. I have used the baseline to measure that against the least affected women, those affected for two months, and the most affected women, those affected for 18 months.

I put together my proposals over the past few days. The conclusion I have reached, according to the figures, is that the only group that would be affected if the proposals were introduced are the people who have to wait for 18 months, the most affected group. Even then, the Government would have to find only £2,357 over the lifetime of the pension. All the other models come out positively for the Government. We should do this as a gesture to the affected women.

Will the Minister sit down with me to look through my figures to see whether there is a satisfactory solution to the problem? I am happy to meet him if he is happy to meet me. We should consider a sensible way forward. I am not entirely sure I will be here for the winding-up speeches, but I would welcome the opportunity to meet the Minister at a later date to discuss a practical solution.

12.53 pm

**Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing this important debate.

I say to the Government, one more time, that they need to stop burying their head in the sand and do the right thing by these women. We are at the same point yet again, debating the unfairness and injustice to women born in the 1950s as a consequence of the pension changes. Without time to prepare and make the necessary alternative arrangements, so many women born in the 1950s are left in financial despair. The reality is that the women are desperate. Affected women call, write and email my office every day to let me know that they have had to sell their belongings and are relying on family, friends and food banks just to exist.

More than 2.5 million women have been wronged by this injustice, which is 2.5 million voices that will not be ignored and 2.5 million women who will not go away.

The changes in the Pensions Act 2011 gave women insufficient time to prepare for retirement, which has caused particular hardship for certain groups: those with lower average life expectancy; those who depend more on their state pension in retirement; those who are more likely to suffer from health problems or disability; and those who have to care for elderly parents, husbands and grandchildren, limiting their ability to work up to and beyond 65.

For some of those women, their jobs are physically demanding and, because of their health, they can no longer do the things they were able to do when they were younger. Although the Minister believes that apprenticeships and accessible work are available to these women, I believe that is an insult. Caseload data shows that the number of women aged 60-plus claiming unemployment benefits increased between 2013 and 2017, more so than the increase among claimants of all other ages.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that there are still loads of inconsistencies, such as that a one-year change in date of birth means an additional three years to reach the pension age for some of these women? That makes the way in which the Government have introduced these changes even more illogical.

**Carolyn Harris:** I have put my thoughts on that on the record many times. Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend.

The number of women aged 60-plus claiming benefits increased by some 9,500 between 2013 and 2017, a 115% increase. Pension age changes have played a substantial part in that increase. It is crucial that this Government recognise the need for fair transitional state pension arrangements, yet they are still not listening. They have deceived these women, stolen their security and shattered their dreams.

In September, my co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on state pension inequality for women, the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), and other cross-party members of the APPG joined me in tabling the Pensions (Review of Women's Arrangements) (No. 2) Bill, which will have its Second Reading in April 2018. In preparation for the Bill, the APPG recently

launched a consultation to gather opinions from affected women. The number of responses to our questionnaire within the first few hours was staggering. To date, we have received nearly 90 responses from groups representing many thousands of women. These women are the people who are living with the consequences of the pension changes, and their voices will be heard.

I have met many women, both in my constituency and as chair of the APPG. I have visited many constituencies across the country to speak to affected women. Most recently, I have visited women with my hon. Friends the Members for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) and for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock). My office is currently dealing with requests to visit 1950s women's groups in Scotland, northern England and across Wales.

Wherever I go, the story is always the same. These women feel cheated and disrespected, and they are angry. Every meeting is packed. Not one of these women has any intention of giving up until they get the result that they have earned and that they deserve—fair transitional payments that allow them to enjoy the retirement for which they have worked very hard over many years.

What about women born in the 1950s who have left this country to live in other parts of Europe? They are not only concerned about how their lives will pan out after Brexit; they are currently feeling extremely vulnerable and, to be honest, left out in the cold when it comes to their pension. Those women do not have an MP to voice their concerns, so they have contacted me and, I am sure, many others in the Chamber to ask what is happening to their pension. They left this country believing that they would get their pension at 60, and they feel robbed.

Many colleagues on both sides of the House agree that the changes to the state pension are unjust and unfair, so it really is time for the Government to stop blocking their ears and start listening. They should let these women have justice. They should do the right thing, the honourable thing, and give the WASPI women, and all 1950s women, the transitional payments they deserve. *[Interruption.]*

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) to begin his speech, let us make it very clear that we do not have cheering and clapping in any part of this Chamber. We do have, "Hear, hear" and we do have smiles and laughs, but we do not have cheering and clapping.

12.59 pm

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): Owing to my cold, I will not be able to speak quite as passionately and as loudly as the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). I congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing this debate. He has played an important role in continuing to highlight the very difficult situation in which many women born on or after 6 April 1950 find themselves as a result of the changes to the state pension age in the 1995 and 2011 Acts. This unfairness needs to be addressed and we need to get on with finding a solution.

I fully support the case for equalising the retirement age and the need to raise the pension age. The latter is required on the grounds of increased life expectancy and financial sustainability. However, such changes have a profound impact on people and the lives they live. Such changes need to be properly researched, to be subject to full consultation and then to be introduced in a fully transparent way. Those steps have not been taken in this instance. Even though the Pensions Act providing for the pension age for women to increase from 60 to 65 was enacted in 1995, government waited 14 years, until April 2009, before it began writing individually to the women affected. That lack of notification meant they had no time to make alternative arrangements for their retirement.

At the time of the 2011 Act, it was clear that there was a problem, and women were raising their concerns with me. As a result, the Government did make changes to limit the impact on those most affected. With hindsight, it is clear that the full scale of the problem was not recognised and that legislation should have been preceded by a full impact assessment.

The WASPI briefing for this debate highlights the unique barriers many women born in the 1950s face in mitigating this sudden change in their circumstances: many have no other source of income, and until the 1990s many women were not allowed to join company pension schemes; many women face difficulties in returning to the workforce and may be suffering from long-term health problems; many, on the expectation of an earlier retirement, have taken on caring responsibilities; and for some, divorce settlements were calculated on the assumption that the state pension was going to be received earlier. Baroness Altmann, in her February 2016 article, provides a compelling case as to why this matter needs to be revisited.

The message from the Waveney constituency and from Suffolk is that this situation must be addressed. When many of us presented petitions in this Chamber last autumn, I was in second place, behind the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), in terms of the number of people who had signed up—2,249 Waveney constituents had done so. Last year, Conservative-run Waveney District Council unanimously endorsed this petition, and last week Conservative-run Suffolk County Council unanimously backed the campaign for equality of pension provision for women. In Suffolk, there has been a tradition of women going out to work, whether in factories, agriculture, fishing, food processing or clerical posts. This was often part-time work, often on low salaries. These changes are disproportionately affecting a lot of them and their families.

**Sandy Martin** (Ipswich) (Lab): I hope the hon. Gentleman and you, Madam Deputy Speaker, will forgive me for intervening. I just wanted to say that the hon. Gentleman has my full support, and that the reason I am not speaking in this debate is simply that so many other people are down to speak. The whole of Suffolk is behind him on this one.

**Peter Aldous**: I am grateful for that endorsement from Suffolk.

I acknowledge the challenges the Government face in finding a way forward that is affordable and that complies with equalities legislation. However, it is clear that a particular group of people have been unfairly penalised.

I thus support the motion, and I urge the Government to find a way forward that is fair, fully considered and affordable.

1.4 pm

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): I rise to speak as secretary of the all-party group on state pension inequality for women. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing this debate. The manner in which the state pension change has affected 1950s women is totally unjust, unfair and immoral. This injustice has short-changed 2.6 million women, causing untold damage to them and their families. It is extremely important that we acknowledge that this is having an impact on families: women are moving back in with their children; and this situation is leading to some marital breakdowns. There are awful stories linked to these financial burdens that women are now facing.

Previously, during Prime Minister's questions, I have mentioned my constituent Dianah Kendall, who suffered a bleed on the brain in 2012. She carried on working, under the assumption that she would be able to retire in September this year. She was not told of the change and she has had to carry on working, because she simply does not have the money to retire. When I asked the Prime Minister when Dianah would be able to retire, I was told, yet again, that she would wait no more than 18 months—she is waiting six years. That is the reality of what was wrong with the Prime Minister's answer. Dianah has carried on running her business and has carried on working. She will not be able to give up working, yet the Government seem completely disinterested in helping women, even those who have major health issues, to be able to retire.

I have other constituents with arthritis, heart conditions and mobility problems who have had to simply deal with the hike in the state pension age. Despite finding it extremely difficult to work, these people have been forced to do so. That is unacceptable for a group of women born at a time when employment rights, support for national insurance contributions and maternity rights simply did not exist. It is deeply unfair that these women are facing yet another injustice.

As part of my work as secretary of the all-party group, I have spoken to women in my constituency and in other constituencies. Women have contacted me with countless lists of problems they are facing. There are women saying to me that they own their own home but they are selling their furniture. How can Ministers justify these sorts of things that are happening to women? Some of them have worked for 40 years, only to be told that they cannot retire when they are expecting to. The answer they are getting is, "Well, simply carry on. By the way, you will only wait 18 months." That simply is not true.

Beyond this House, it is not just the women who were born in the 1950s who are campaigning; there is a huge amount of support from the public. There is also support from Members from across this House. I have made a list of no fewer than 50 Government Members who support the campaign, in addition to colleagues from the Democratic Unionist party, the Scottish National party, the Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru. That should mean that if the Government gave us some legislative time to reverse these decisions, we would win.

[Chris Elmore]

Is it not about time they stepped up and offered support to these women, because there is support right across the House for actual support and change for these 1950s women?

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), I held a meeting, just two weeks ago, for women across my constituency, many of whom still are not aware of the pension changes, or have only recently become informed because of the campaign being led by 1950s women. More than 100 turned up. Some of them raised new issues—for example, when some were deciding to defer their pension, as is their right, they had not realised that they should have been entitled to it two years before. It was only when they have engaged in what the 1950s women are campaigning for that they realised they should have had it two years before. But because of the lack of information and no letters telling women about the changes, they were not been aware that their deferment is forced, whether they want to defer or not.

I truly believe the tide is turning, with the pressure on the Government. I hope the Government and Ministers are listening to what is going on out in the country and to the fact that these women are suffering. We need the Government to step up, cave in and find the legislative time to make changes to support the 2.5 million women affected. I will always fight for the women in my constituency who are affected, and for women up and down the country. The Government need to listen. I urge Conservative Members—the co-chair of the all-party group, the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), is a true champion of this issue—to come with us, to get the Government to change their mind and to start to help the 1950s women who need our support now.

1.9 pm

**Jo Churchill** (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing this debate on such an important subject. It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore).

I, too, have had meetings with WASPI women. As my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) discussed, this is a real and prevalent issue for many women in Suffolk. Nevertheless, I have discovered that stories differ. It is important to treat people as individuals on their journey through life. We do not necessarily serve all our population well if we lump everything together in our discussions of these matters. As I understand it, the primary thing is that no matter what the hue of the Government, there needs to be clarity in the information that is passed down on these important issues. There is blame across the piece for people not getting the information. People tell me that letters often were not received, and I have no reason to think that they were. There is a problem in ensuring that people are properly informed.

**Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con) *rose*—

**Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con) *rose*—

**Jo Churchill**: What choices! I give way to my hon. Friend from the south-west first.

**Neil Parish**: Does my hon. Friend agree that this is very important for the generation of women affected? Although some of them saw the letters, others did not, and some did not receive them, so they have not been able to make plans for their retirement. The next generation of women will know exactly what is coming. We have made some alterations, but the Government need to be much more generous than they have been to this group of women.

**Jo Churchill**: I agree with my hon. Friend, but it also affects those of us who were in our late 40s when we received the letters. I received one in 2011 or 2012, which proves that they do work. I took a 10% hit in my working life. I will be working until I am 67, I think—

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): You are not on the minimum wage.

**Jo Churchill**: Granted, but I spent a great deal of my life looking after children and so on. I am not in any way undermining the fact that in my surgery I have had not only women who have been carers—that is a broader issue for many Departments and successive Governments—but individuals who made life decisions prior to 2010. I have lobbied the Minister on that and he has discussed individual women's cases with me at length. One in particular involved a midwife who went off and did five years' work overseas for charity, predicating her decision on the information she had when she left. When she came back, not only was her situation affected by the fact that she had spent those five years serving other people, but she found that her midwifery registration was affected. When she tried to return to work, the job for which she could apply was compromised. So there are genuine cases, but perhaps we miss some of the importance of what we are discussing by treating everybody in this universal way.

**Mims Davies**: I, too, have lobbied the Minister on this issue. I pay tribute to the Solent WASPI women, who have also presented a petition here in Parliament. Many of the affected women are unable to go back to work because they have already taken on a caring responsibility. That very much affects what they can do financially.

**Jo Churchill**: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. She works unstintingly for carers up and down the country, and we could have a broader discussion about how we value carers, who are predominantly women.

The hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) highlighted the specific issues facing a lot of the affected women, but I say gently that those are issues that women—whether they are in their 50s, 40s, 30s or 20s—are dealing with across the piece. Women tend to bear the brunt of these things. As my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) said, there are challenges in rural areas, and my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney brought up the issue of financial service organisations and banks not playing their part by also being a conduit of information for women. A series of events led to the current situation, and we have all found ourselves learning that communication should be better.

At the nub of this is the fact that we have a problem. In 1917, 24 letters were sent from the Monarch to women who were turning 100; last year, the Queen sent 24,000. By 2050, some 56,000 people will celebrate their 100th birthday.

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We have already heard about Suffolk, and the prediction is that by 2039 the majority of people in the county will be over 65. This is an extraordinary change in our society, and we will have to accept the costs that come with that.

**Jo Churchill:** Indeed we will. The nub of my point is that many of us come to this place as women and as carers. My husband and I still have four living parents, which is great. It is a sign of improved medical care and so on. Nevertheless, we have four children who arguably will bear the brunt of paying for these costs.

In one of my surgeries recently, I spoke to a woman who is affected by the changes to the state pension age—she is a WASPI woman. She said:

“I was born in 1956 and have been fortunate to work all my life”—

I take on board the point made by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy)—“in a variety of careers that I have enjoyed.”

She explained that some of those careers were due to necessity of circumstance. She was warned in two letters that her state pension age would be changing. She will receive her state pension at 66.

She went on:

“I will be 62 next birthday and even if I was in receipt of a pension, I would struggle to stop working as I thoroughly enjoy my current job.”

That is what I mean about the need to consider this issue on a more individual basis. The woman continued:

“I appreciate that I am very fortunate as I am blessed with good health”—

there have been several allusions to that in the debate. She said that she had a supportive husband

“and 3 lovely children. I expect to live longer than my parents but my perception is that my children struggle more financially than I did at their age. I realise that my taxes contributed to my parents’ pensions and my children’s taxes will fund mine. I cannot expect my already financially challenged children to contribute to my pension, for many, many more years. That would seem very unfair.”

If we do not see through these changes to the state pension, the burden on our children will be astronomical. This is not fair, but it is where we find ourselves. We must ensure that our response is proportionate.

It is about choices. I say gently to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) that the Scottish National party has the ability to make a unilateral decision if it wants to.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): I agree that the SNP does have that ability, but should we not look at making a decision for all women in the United Kingdom, rather than saying, “Well, you can do it there and you can do it over there,?” This is a UK-wide problem, so we should not be singling people out.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. The hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) has been very generous in taking interventions, but I am afraid she has run out of time.

**Jo Churchill:** In that case, I shall finish, Madam Deputy Speaker, and let somebody else speak.

**Several hon. Members** rose—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. Everyone is running out of time, so I am reducing the time limit to five minutes.

1.19 pm

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): First, may I declare an interest as one of those 1950s-born women who are directly affected by changes to the state pension age? Unlike many—some are sitting in the Public Gallery—I am fortunate to be able to raise the issue in the Chamber. The fact is that many of these 1950s-born women have been hit not just once but twice by changes to the state pension age.

Those of us born in the 1950s were first hit by the equalisation of the state pension age to that of men, with transitional arrangements in place according to date of birth up to 2020. Sadly, the then Government did not see fit to tell the women affected about the change, so many remained unaware and looked forward to receiving their state pension at 60. As they approached 60, they were devastated to find the financial ground shifting beneath their feet. In 2011, the coalition Government sped up the changes, so the state pension age for women reached 65 by 2018, and would rise with an increase in the state pension age for men and women to 66 by April 2020. Many women were left completely unable to make up that financial gap, and that would have been the case even if they had been aware of the earlier changes, which many of them were not. It is ironic that measures that were designed to increase state pension equality should have such a discriminatory effect on women in particular. They have indeed had a discriminatory effect, as many 1950s-born women face real hardship.

Out of the thousands of women in my constituency, I wish to refer to two whose cases particularly struck me. Barbara, whose door I knocked on during the election campaign, had worked all her life; indeed, she was working until just before I knocked on her door. She had worked for British Home Stores, but following the collapse of that company, she found herself without a state pension and, in a classic double whammy, without a company pension at that stage. Then there was the woman who approached me, quite unsolicited, in Blaydon shopping centre who said, “We need to do something.” She said that she had retired early to look after her mum, thinking that she would get her state pension at 60, only to find, after her mum’s death, that she could not get her pension. She had to rely on benefits and family support, and that was after working most of her life.

These cases are not unique, so the issue will not go away. Many women still contact me to say that they have joined the WASPI campaign and registered cases for maladministration with the Department for Work and Pensions, leading to even more of a backlog with the independent complaints examiner who is considering this issue.

Where do we go from here? The Government must address the issue as a matter of urgency. I have no doubt that we will hear about the measures that the Government have put in place to help people into work

[Liz Twist]

or apprenticeships. That is absolutely fabulous for any woman who wants to work and is able to do so, but there are many women whose circumstances mean that they are not able to do so. They were not expecting these changes and they find themselves unable to work, having looked after parents or family. Frankly, in a competitive market, it is just not that easy for 1950s-born women to find work.

**Mr Pat McFadden** (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that whatever measures the Government might have taken, those measures have not worked and nor have they dealt with the problem? The continuing sense of injustice is still there, which is why we are having this debate.

**Liz Twist:** Yes, I most certainly do agree. I am asking the Government to meet the WASPI campaigners, explore solutions, look at transitional state pension arrangements, and make resolving this issue a priority for the 3.8 million women affected. This is a campaign powered by women with determination and courage, and I commend all who are determined that this cause will be addressed.

1.24 pm

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate and I congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on bringing it forward.

I have received a considerable amount of correspondence about this matter from the ladies in South Suffolk who are affected by the change, although I do not know whether they are in the Public Gallery today. As everyone else, quite rightly, is focusing on the specific issue faced by that cohort of women, I want to consider its long-term implications for the state pension system. We need to ask ourselves whether the system is really fit for purpose. Do we have a state pension system that actually delivers any longer?

The key thing is that we have a pay-as-you-go system. The most common argument that we hear from ladies who have been affected by these changes is, "I have paid in contributions all my life; it is my pension pot." They believe that as they have paid in their money, they have a contract for what they should receive in return. The problem is that there is no such pot. None of us in the state pension system has a pot with our name on it. We have a pay-as-you-go system. This month's national insurance contributions from the working population pay for this month's pension liabilities in the state system. I am afraid that that system is extremely vulnerable in the face of demographic change.

**Mhairi Black:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**James Cartlidge:** I always give way to the hon. Lady.

**Mhairi Black:** I am very grateful to my former Committee colleague for giving way. I would just like to ask whether the same pay-as-you-go system applies for the Democratic Unionist party and remaining in power.

**James Cartlidge:** That is not a function of the state pension system. I will resist the bait to which the hon. Lady tries to get me to rise.

It is important that we remember the costs involved. The DWP spends £264 billion a year, of which the largest part is for the state pension. At £111 billion, it is by far the biggest single piece of public expenditure. That sum gives out a state pension of on average just under £160 a week—not exactly a king's ransom. Of course pensioner poverty would be far higher in the current age were it not for the fact that many of this generation of pensioners are fortunate enough to have occupational pensions—and good luck to them. My parents are in that generation, many of whom own property. Savills estimates that the housing equity of people over 65 is about £1.5 trillion, so that generation has been cushioned to a certain degree. It has also been cushioned by the Government's actions to protect pensioner benefits and introduce the triple lock, all of which have protected state pension expenditure from the necessary savings made in other Departments.

**Christine Jardine:** Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that, regardless of the figure that he quoted, the people who are paying the price for this are women born in the 1950s?

**James Cartlidge:** Actually my point was going to be that everyone will end up paying the price. Of course this debate is about a specific cohort that has been hit quite directly and over a specific period, and there is also the whole issue of notification. However, although young people going into the workforce know about the change in the retirement age and have had notification, that does not mean they will be able to save adequately for a pension. It also does not mean that they will be able to afford one, or to get a foot on the housing ladder, and they probably will not have an occupational pension. We cannot look at this issue in isolation; we need to look at the whole system.

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we must get away from talking about women born in the 1950s as though they are some kind of burden on society? These women are asking only for what they were promised and what they themselves have paid for. They are not a burden; they are people looking for justice.

**James Cartlidge:** No one is saying that. My whole point is this: when the women say they have paid in, that does not exist. That is just a mathematical fact; it is not a nefarious thing. The system was not designed for this ageing population and the demographic changes that we are seeing. The duty on us in government and in this place is to be open and honest about that, and to try to come up with reforms that address it.

In my view—and this is a big deal—we should try to move to a funded pension system. Let us be honest: that is not a minor detail. If my hon. Friend the Minister asked his officials what they would think of that, they would say, "Sit down, put a cool, wet flannel on your head, have a cup of tea, and move on to the next issue." What I suggest is not a minor deal. As I understand it, the only Government who ever moved from a pay-as-you-go system to a funded one was Pinochet's in Chile—and he did not have to worry about Back-Bench rebellions and so on.

A funded pension would be extremely difficult to achieve because, of course, a generation would have to pay twice, but I believe that it could be done. We have had two proposals on this. During the April 1997 general election campaign, our party proposed basic pension plus. Peter Lilley came up with a system that would move us from the current state pension to a funded one. It would have been fully in place by 2040, so just 23 years from now, the liability for the state pension would have started to fall very dramatically. Instead, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility, the forecast for public spending 50 years from today, at current prices, is an extra £156 billion. That is mainly due to demographic change, higher costs of health care, more complex health needs and so on. That is an extraordinary position to be in and, as the OBR says, it is not remotely sustainable.

My hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) has said that the other option is a sovereign wealth fund. Any funded state pension is effectively a sovereign wealth fund. It is a way of taking all the money that we pay into an unproductive, pay-as-you-go state pension system and investing it to meet our country's needs, thereby boosting productivity and investment, and giving a greater return and greater ownership to people in an age when ownership in the capitalist system is under threat. There are huge benefits to be had. At the moment, the savings ratio is extremely low—that is one of the most worrying things in the Budget Red Book—but if the system forces people to save from a young age, it can be very effective. That is what we have with the new system.

There are specific issues, and we should look at the ladies who have been affected by this change, but if we really want to resolve it, we have to learn the long-term lessons. We owe it to those affected to ask how we can stop future generations being affected. If people own their pension—if it is theirs—the state cannot arbitrarily put in place this sort of change. It will take many years to establish a fully funded system, but there would be immediate short-term benefits as we moved to an economy on a more long-term keel. There would be more confidence in investment and we would move away from a more boom-and-bust, higher consumer debt model, which is why I think my hon. Friend has it spot on with a sovereign wealth fund. Either way, we need to start looking at the problem. We will need cross-party consensus, to be radical, and to look to the future rather than focusing on the short term.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. I have to reduce the time limit to four minutes.

1.31 pm

**Fiona Onasanya** (Peterborough) (Lab): I not only congratulate but commend my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on introducing this important debate. I have heard many voices across the Chamber, but we must recognise the injustice that these women have suffered. It is not a case of simply saying, “We hear the issues that our constituents have raised with us.” We need to listen. The hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) talked about proportionality and cost. The Government could take actions such as early draw-down now. It would be cost-neutral and

would have a beneficial impact. I do not understand what prevents the Government from introducing early draw-down for women who wish to pursue this option. To do nothing is not only inadequate, but unfair and unjust.

I have been contacted by a number of constituents about proportionality. We cannot simply say that only one or two women in our constituencies have come to our attention and we need to look at individuals. This is a massive issue for a number of women, which the WASPI women's plight brings to our attention. We must do something; it is not enough just to say that we hear. We need to listen and take action. While I understand that the pension age has to go up, the rate of the increase has been rapid and women have been given little warning or time to prepare. Many Members will have heard the phrase “to forewarn is to forearm”. Where was the forewarning for some of these women? We cannot sit back and say, “Oh, we are very sorry that you didn't get a letter.” We cannot compare them with young people much like myself and say, “But in years to come we will have to deal with differences in the state pension we are eligible for.” This is the specific plight of the 1950s-born women who have been dealt a very unjust blow. It is simply not acceptable to say, “There were letters. Everyone has to suffer. At some point everyone will come across this. Younger people will be affected.”

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): A disproportionate number of 1950s-born women do not have occupational pensions, so they are uniquely exposed and are reliant on the state pension. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is all the more galling for them as a result?

**Fiona Onasanya:** I agree with my hon. Friend. That is absolutely correct. We need to understand that the state pension is not a welfare benefit. We are not saying, “Sorry, some of you have paid in but we just cannot do what we promised you.” If someone has worked since they were 15 and paid into a system that they believed would pay them back in their time of need, if they have been relying on that and it is then taken away, and if they do not have a workplace pension or did not get put into that type of pension, that will have dire consequences and cause negative impacts on their life.

I was contacted by a number of women in my constituency, one of whom was Wendy Hopkins. She advised me that she had been working since she was 15 and had paid all her national insurance contributions, thinking that she could retire at 60. Two years before, she was told that the retirement age had been increased to 63. Within 18 months of that, she was told that she had to wait until she turned 66. As hon. Members can imagine, that did not afford sufficient time to make arrangements to make up her financial loss. She had to rely on her husband, who is 67 and is taking a part-time job to cover their financial loss.

It is important and prudent to acknowledge that some women received the letter about the Pension Act 2011 advising them that their pensionable age would be increased by another 15 months. However, personal circumstances, which some hon. Members seem to overlook, mean that not everyone is in a position to take up an apprenticeship, or work. They may have to care for their

[*Fiona Onasanya*]

partner or even their children. They should not have to continue to work. This is something they were promised, and we need to respect that.

We need to act now. There are cost-neutral actions that we could take, and we need to take them.

1.36 pm

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Another day, another debate on pensions for women born in the 1950s. We have now had many more debates on this subject than Elizabeth Taylor had husbands, and much like her seventh husband, I find it difficult to know what new to bring to the bedroom, if not the debate today.

This situation is not going to go away. I am proud to be the co-chair of the all-party group, and I am pleased to have co-sponsored the debate here today. WASPI is not just those groups calling themselves WASPI; it is hundreds of thousands and millions of women who find themselves in this position. I welcome the work that the all-party group is doing and the survey that we have sent out. I hope that we will get some concrete data back, and I will certainly support the Bill when it comes to the House in April.

There are three main problems. First, no one is complaining about equalising the pension age; it is the process and mechanism of doing so that is at fault. The impact on a specific group of women—more than 3 million now—is disproportionate. It is calculated that 33% of men will retire with just the state pension to rely on, but 53% of women will do so. The issue is much more important to women.

The second problem is the arbitrary cut-off date that many women have suffered retrospectively. The pension age of a woman born on 6 May 1953 will now be November 2016—a loss of some £2,000 on what she might originally have expected. The pension age of someone born a year later on 6 May 1954 will now be January 2020, a loss of £20,000. That is a huge difference for the sake of 12 months.

**Peter Aldous:** My hon. Friend is making his case very well. Does he agree that, before the 2011 changes were introduced, some sort of analysis should have been done to address the problems he identifies?

**Tim Loughton:** That is right, because there is a cliff edge effect. I am afraid that we hear time and again from Ministers that £1 billion transition money was given in 2011, but of course half that money went to men to make up for their transition differences. Women did not benefit disproportionately from that additional money, ungenerous though it was.

The third problem is the lack of notice. Many women, even if they got the notice, were not in a position to make preparations and alter their lifestyle to enable them to survive through their 60s. Many of them have caring responsibilities. They have depleted savings. They have disabilities.

Of course, there are other disadvantages that women suffered. Women were, and still are, paid less than men. Women's pension savings are typically 66% less than men's. Back in the 1970s—the decade when most 1950s-born

women started work—women were often ineligible to join their employer's pension scheme, and they were often passed over for promotion in favour of male colleagues. That is the legacy that these women bring with them now. There are other disadvantages. The 2001 changes to the widow's pension mean that those widowed prior to their state pension age no longer receive a full widow's pension until they reach their full SPA, which has now, of course, been delayed.

We need to find a solution. The Government need to listen, get round a table and discuss this. There are many different transition arrangements we could bring in. Scaremongering that it is going to cost tens of billions of pounds is really not helpful. We can do things around bus passes and the winter fuel allowance that would have a meaningful effect for many women, but we need to help those who are in most need and who are suffering now.

It is important to reiterate that this is not a benefit; it is an entitlement. Some of these women could have paid national insurance contributions—I appreciate that that is not directly linked to a pension—for as long as 50 years by the time they retire. It is reasonable for them to expect that they would start to benefit at the time they contracted to when they started working and paying their employment dues to the Treasury. I also echo the points made by my co-chair, the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), about women overseas.

We have a duty of care to these women—a specific set of women who should not be affected in the future because we have changed the law. That duty of care needs to be honoured before more women suffer or, worse, come to the end of their lives. As my co-chair said, they are feeling cheated, disrespected and angry. Last year, the Prime Minister said she wanted a country “built on...fairness...where everyone plays by the same rules”.

Let us start by demonstrating that and by righting this injustice now.

1.41 pm

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I completely agree with the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton): this is an entitlement for women. I also commend my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), who has a real determination to ensure that women get justice.

I am so proud of women. Women in York and across the country are standing up for their rights, and we will back them. My question is this: why is it always women who have to experience so much financial hardship and poverty in later life? We know that the structures of employment drive women into poverty. Some 36% of women work part time, compared with 22% of men. Women working part time earn a third less than full-time men. Women take on responsibilities for intergenerational care. A quarter of women do not return to work after having a child—for 17% of them, that is because of pregnancy discrimination. Therefore, women are already economically disadvantaged.

We know that vertical pay structures with job segregation mean that women earn £25,000 on average, compared with men's £30,000. There is a north-south divide in this issue too, with women in the north earning less on average than women in the south. We also know that women tend to be concentrated in low-paid jobs. As we

have heard, those jobs follow the “Cs”—childcare, eldercare, catering, cashiering, cleaning and clerical work. Often, this is physical labour, which means that it is hard for women to work in later life, and that must be recognised.

When we hear a story in our surgery, as I did on Friday, of a woman who has five jobs—three zero-hours jobs and two part-time jobs—we know that it is tough for women. However, many more women cannot get any employment at all in later life. We also know that the occupational pension that women have saved up for is far less than men’s. On average, women get only £2,500 a year from an occupational pension. Then, there is the further injustice of not being able to receive their state pension, after they have made their contributions. That is a complete disgrace. I am fed up that it is always women who have to pay the price.

If we look at other countries, we see that they take a lifelong approach to pensions. If they bring in changes, people are aware of them decades before. Here, even though the Turner commission talked about a period of 15 years, women are not having their rights honoured.

We therefore have to look particularly at women in poverty and their experience at the moment. As we have just heard, 1.9 million people in our country are living in poverty, and 40,000 people died last winter because they could not even afford to heat their homes, so we have to address the issue of women of pension age in poverty. We know that, among the WASPI women, pensioner poverty has increased from 12% to 21%. There is a real issue to be addressed there.

It was not women who failed, but it is women who have been failed. Women are now having to pay; they have always had to pay, and they have always been discriminated against—to the point of poverty. It was the Government who made these changes. It was the Government who failed to notify these women. We must rectify this gross injustice to end poverty for women in later life. Let us have real dignity for women in the future, and let us honour what they paid into.

1.45 pm

**Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con):** I also congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing today’s debate, and I was happy to add my signature to the application to ensure that it got through the Backbench Business Committee.

May I take this opportunity to pay tribute to local Moray WASPI campaigners? Several other Scottish Members have intervened today to say that their campaigners are watching at home or in a union building in Glasgow. I am delighted that I have a local WASPI campaigner and others from Moray in the Gallery today. One of them is Jennifer Matheson, who is fresh from abseiling off a building in Lossiemouth recently to raise funds for Outfit Moray, when she was resplendent in her WASPI colours to show her continued support for the campaign. May I also put on record my support and admiration for Sheila Forbes, who leads the Moray WASPI campaign?

I have previously spoken in debates on this issue in this Chamber, but today I want to focus on local case studies to ensure that the effects the women in Moray face as a result of these changes are recorded in the *Official Report*, because the testimony of these women is extremely important.

One lady continues to look after three generations, as well as holding down a full-time job. However, because of the stress caused by her concerns over her pension age, she is now off sick. Another lady, who is close by in the Chamber at the moment, says:

“I am now 64, so four...years without my pension.”

She has worked since she was 16, and she has 43 years of national insurance contributions. To echo some of the comments made by other hon. Members today, this constituent has two schoolmates born in the same year as she was, 1953—one was born in February, and one in July—and they already have their pensions. So birthdays only nine months apart can mean two years’ difference in terms of state pension pay-outs.

Another constituent resigned when she was 61 from an extremely stressful job, and she felt she could live off her savings until she got to her pension age at 62, only to find out that it had changed to 66. She then had the double whammy of trying to claim her occupational pension and being advised that, if she took it, she would lose 5% each year before she reached state retirement age of 66.

In the short time available, I want to finish with another story from Moray. This lady is a carer for her husband, who took a dense stroke five years ago. They were going to use some of the state pension money to buy specialist equipment that was not available on the NHS. That story is harrowing, but the key point for me was that she never, ever received a letter informing her that she would not be getting a pension at 60.

**Mark Menzies:** My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. There are lots of women who find themselves taking on caring responsibilities because their partners have life-changing health conditions. It is really important that the Minister takes this into account when looking at the pension implications for these women.

**Douglas Ross:** I am grateful for that intervention. We have heard that message from both sides of the Chamber, and I am very hopeful that the Minister will take it on board.

The final point I want to make about this specific constituent was that she had lived at the same address for 27 years—she had not moved house, and she had not moved around the country—yet she never received a single letter from the DWP about these changes. That is the inadequacy we have to look at.

I would like to echo the comments of the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris)—sadly, she is not in the Chamber at the moment—and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who spoke about the all-party group’s study into this issue, which I fully support—I was at the launch in Westminster Hall recently. It is great to hear that there have been 90 submissions so far, but we need more because this is an opportunity for WASPI groups and WASPI women across the country to get involved and to ensure that we go through the process and have something to offer the Minister and the Government. We want to identify a solution, and it is important that the women affected by these changes are involved in that.

All 3.8 million WASPI women agree with equalisation, as we have heard across the Chamber today.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman share my concerns, and those of many others in this Chamber, about women who are doing physical and perhaps menial work and who are unable to continue to work for another two years? Does he agree that the Government should consider those who are physically unable to work and to cope with the extra two years and that action should be taken to help those women?

**Douglas Ross:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. I was able to raise only some of the testimonies that I have had from Moray WASPI women, but I would have included those who are continuing in very hard labour jobs and have worked for a very long time in these sectors, where they have also experienced gender inequality. They suffered while they were working, they thought they were coming up to retirement age, and they have had to continue extremely strenuous work into a period where they thought they would have been retired. They have been hard-working, conscientious employees for so long, and they deserve our support. I hope that the many who are here with us today, and indeed the many around the country who are watching this debate, will feel that there is support around this Chamber and across the parties.

As I said, the key issue is the lack of notification. That is indefensible on the part of any Government. These decisions were made not only by the current Conservative Government but across these green Benches. Governments have let these women down by not ensuring that they had the notification they required to make their plans for the future. As we have heard, they were faced with a cliff edge with no prior notice. That is wrong, and that is why I support the WASPI women.

I also support the very positive comments that we heard earlier about the fact that we are fighting for these ladies' entitlement to something that they have paid into for their entire lives. They should not have to fight for it—they should be given it. They entered into a contract with the Government that said, "At the end of it, you will receive this pension at this age." That is why I support these women in fighting for that entitlement. It is why I support the Moray WASPI women who are with us today, all the WASPI women in the Gallery, and all the WASPI women who are watching at home.

1.52 pm

**Clive Lewis** (Norwich South) (Lab): This is a fantastic debate. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for the hard and tireless work he has done on this issue.

Many of us in this House, on both sides of the Chamber, do not see pensions as a burden but as an expression of collective solidarity among generations. We are proud of pensions—they are part of the glue of a civilised society and we will always defend them. That is why we defend and speak up for the WASPI women.

Like so many others in the Chamber today, I am here to represent many constituents who are among the millions of women—it sounds as though half of them are up in the Gallery today—who have suffered as a result of Government policy on pensions. The basic facts of this whole issue are now well-known. Many of the cases that Members will raise today will tell fundamentally the same story, but it is important that

those stories be told. That is because the injustice of this consists not only in its quality—the sheer, brazen wrongness of it—but in its scale, with 3.8 million women being robbed of that which they were promised.

This is a huge scandal that must be faced up to by the Government as soon as possible. I have case studies of my own to tell—stories of constituents. Perhaps one of the most chilling and telling aspects is that I have been asked by my local 1950s women's groups to anonymise them so as to not reveal their identities, because some of these women have been reduced to utter poverty and embarrassment. That is shocking. Women who have, in one way or another, spent their whole lives either working or caring for others—women in their 60s whose entire life plans were based on the knowledge that they would be receiving pensions in a given year—have been tossed casually on to the benefits system, with all its attendant humiliations. Some of my constituents have been forced to go out and get cleaning jobs on the minimum wage. Almost as bad as the financial robbery is the humiliation and insult. One woman is now forced to sell her home because she is unable to qualify for benefits—to sell the only asset she had acquired in a lifetime of work and service.

I have mentioned the quality of this injustice and its quantity—the numbers of those affected. However, there is another element that makes this scandal a terrible stain on all of us in this place—the perpetrator of the injustice. It has been carried out not by some faceless corporate financial mega-business domiciled in Panama, or by some fly-by-night wheeler-dealer, but by Her Majesty's Government. I am chair of the APPG on fair business banking and finance. We have found in our work alarming evidence of malpractice and fraud in our financial sector that is truly disgraceful. We have also found that trust and faith in our financial sector are now shockingly low. But why should we be surprised by what is happening in the private sector if the Government themselves—the same Government who are supposed to regulate and keep the system fair—are so ready to casually rip off millions of women?

Trust, as we know, is hard won and easily lost. Yet without it, the entire basis of consent under which democratic government operates is lost. If we allow this injustice to persist, we will be doing our whole country a great disservice. I call on the Government to bring forward a fair and reasonable plan to solve this without delay.

1.55 pm

**Martin Whitfield** (East Lothian) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), who so eloquently described the problems in his area. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing this debate. I especially thank all the WASPI women up and down the United Kingdom who continue their fight for justice and for their voice to be heard.

We have rightly debated on many occasions, and at length, the technicalities of why we are in the position that we are in today. It boils down to poor notice, poor care and apathy for many years. It is time that that finished. There has been maladministration. It is time for us to stand up and admit that, face the consequences, and across this House—and, indeed, across the United Kingdom—find a way to successfully end it.

I would like to raise two cases from East Lothian—a constituency with just over 6,000 women affected by this. The first is that of Diane. She was born in 1952, and worked full-time. In 1969, she was told that she had to pay her full national insurance contribution to make sure that she would get her full pension at 60, and this she did. She started work at 16, attended evening classes and worked through day-release to carry on with her job. She was unable to attend college because her parents could not afford it. She worked her entire working life, going part-time when her children arrived to look after them. She has paid in for 44 years. Today, it is necessary to contribute for only 30 years to guarantee a full pension, so she has contributed for 14 years longer than that. She was not informed that her pension age was changing from 60, or that she was going to get a reduced pension. She genuinely feels, and rightly so, that she has been let down by her country.

The second case is that of Lorna. Born in 1954, she started work one month before her 16th birthday. She now has two grown-up children raised by her and her husband. She and her husband have both paid their way, and provided for their family, for their entire lives. She always believed that she would receive her state pension on her 60th birthday, but it did not occur. Her sister, born in 1953, received her pension at 63, but Lorna, born in 1954, has to wait until she is 66. Her husband works full-time on 12-hour shifts. Lorna is unwell. She has huge mobility problems and significant other problems. Her husband will not receive his pension until 2022. He is two years younger than she is. They still have a mortgage to pay and are still expected to contribute to that. If she had received her pension at 60, she would have been able to live a life in which she was shown some respect. This has been removed from her, as from so many women we have heard about today, so many women who are here with us in the Gallery, and so many women around the country.

Now is the time for this Government to listen. We have heard support across these Benches for proposals that would rectify this. Now is the time for us to give justice to the WASPI women.

1.59 pm

**Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing this debate. I speak in support of this motion, delivering on the pledge I made when I was elected to this place that I would fight for the rights of 1950s women to obtain what they are entitled to. The way in which those women have been treated by the Government is disgusting and downright disrespectful. It is totally unacceptable that women born in the 1950s are suffering financial hardship because the Government failed to communicate state pension rises to them effectively. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who travels widely across the country to fight for 1950s women, will be attending a 1950s women's event in Gower on 20 January, and I thank her for her support.

Some women were given only one year's notice of the change; others got up to five years' warning, but many never received a letter at all. Labour Members recognise the injustice that those women have been dealt. Our policies complement the legal action for compensation that some 1950s-born women's groups are seeking.

Our policies are tangible, and they represent action that the Government could take now to ensure that women in their 60s do not have to face homelessness, claim through the broken system of universal credit or, like my constituent's mother, sadly pass away without having told their families about the change to their pension age.

When we discuss this inequality, it is important to note that we are talking about women's lives being affected. Indeed, many 1950s WASPI women in my constituency can tell harrowing stories that illustrate the personal impact of pension inequality. My constituent's mother was born in April 1953, and she was an extremely hard worker who worked all her life. Some 20 years ago, she split from her husband and worked full time, raising her child as a single mother. She had always said that although she loved her work, she was looking forward to a much deserved retirement at the age of 60. After 60, however, her attitude changed. She would say things like, "I wouldn't know what to do if I retired anyway." During that time, she was still travelling and working five or six days a week at a garden centre in Llansamlet.

After my constituent's mother turned 60, she decided out of the blue to take a job closer to home at another garden centre, which she said was not so difficult to get to. Her family kept on at her about why she would not retire, but she just said that she did not really want to. Changes in the state pension age meant that instead of retiring at 60 in April 2013, she would have had to until July 2016. Like many WASPI women, she was given very little notice that her retirement age had changed.

Sadly, my constituent's mother passed away on 30 October 2015 from pneumonia, aged just 62. She had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, but even with that, she refused to slow down. That was what ultimately led to her death. It was only after her death, when they were dealing with the estate, that her family realised that she had carried on working not because she did not want to retire, but because she could not retire, despite their best efforts to convince her to do so. She had not wanted to tell them, because she had not wanted them to worry. The situation has caused a huge amount of distress to her family, who feel that if she had retired when she originally planned to, she would have lived longer, even with her COPD.

My constituent's mother, and many like her, should not be put through such ordeals after a lifetime of work. The motion would provide for fair transitional arrangements for women born on or after 6 April 1950 who are affected by the Government's chaotic management of state pension equalisation. I and my hon. Friends will continue to fight for and work with the 1950s women to right the wrong that they have been done.

2.3 pm

**Hugh Gaffney** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I start by paying tribute and dedicating this speech to my good friend and sister Mary Moore, aka Doyle. As I speak, her family will be attending her burial service, and I know that Mary would have been the first to ask me to speak out and stand up for her generation of women—the WASPI women. I would also like to say a word of thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris). He is a tireless champion in this House of working people and the WASPI women.

[Hugh Gaffney]

We have come together to debate an issue of fairness, of decency and of what is right and wrong. I know that women affected by the inaction of this Government—particularly the WASPI women in Glasgow and Lanarkshire—are watching this debate live in Glasgow today, and I thank Unison in Glasgow for making that possible. The WASPI women are watching and listening, and they deserve action. They deserve honesty, and they deserve decency and equality. I say to them: “I am with you, and I know that Labour Members are with you, too.”

Like many Members of the House, I have campaigned with, welcomed to my surgery, cried with and listened to the stories of WASPI women. Take Helen, for example. Helen lives in my constituency. She was born on 18 January 1954, and she will shortly be celebrating her 64th birthday. Helen has spent her adult life working, and her job will come to an end in April. If she followed the advice of the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), Helen should either apply for jobseekers’ allowance or apply for an apprenticeship. Yes, Members heard me—an apprenticeship at 64. I think she should be able to claim her pension and enjoy dignity and respect. Helen and women like her should not have to sing their favourite Beatles song:

“Will you still need me, will you still feed me  
When I’m sixty-four?”

Yes, Helen, we do still need you, and yes, Helen, we will feed you.

I would like the Minister to let us know why he refused a meeting with the WASPI campaign. I know that he has turned down a request to meet several times, and I would like to know why. The Government have a duty to bring our country and its people together, and I want to know why they have not and will not. A few short weeks ago, I was very pleased to be able to lead my first Westminster Hall debate, which was on the state pension age. It was a good debate, and I was very grateful to the many Labour colleagues who joined us that day and stood up for their constituents. It was sad that during the debate, Tory Back Benchers made only two interventions. They had an opportunity to speak up then, but they did not take it.

I was sent to this House to stand up for working people, and there is no greater pleasure for me than to know that I give voice in this Chamber to decent, working people out there. I have had many emails, letters and calls from WASPI women, and it has been an honour to receive every one of them. I say to the Government, “Don’t mess with the WASPI women—they will sting.” I say to the WASPI women, the women in the Gallery and the women back home in Glasgow, “Until justice is done, I will be fighting with you.”

2.6 pm

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): During the many questions and debates on pensions for women, we have heard the facts, the figures and the dates relating to the 3.8 million women who are affected, so I am not going to cite figures or talk about dates. Instead, I am going to talk about a woman I met a few weeks ago, whom I will refer to as Mary.

Mary came to see me in my surgery on a particularly wet and cold morning. When she arrived she was visibly shaken and upset, because she had slipped over on wet leaves as she walked into the room. I offered to meet her at another time, but she was insistent that she wanted to speak to me that morning. She apologised for being late, and explained that she was so tired that it was making her clumsy. I asked how I could help her, and she told me that she was on bereavement leave because her son had died in July and, despite support from work, her grief made it impossible for her to return to work in the local supermarket.

Mary told me that she acts as a carer for her husband, who has a degenerative condition. His health has declined to the point where he is unable to leave his chair and needs constant care, and that was why she did not want to rearrange our appointment. She was adamant that she needed me to hear her story. She told me that she had not found out until 2013 that she would have to work until 65, and that the memory was vivid in her mind. She was told about it by a colleague, and she did not believe it at first. She told her colleague, “You must have got this wrong,” and she went home and phoned the pension line. Afterwards, she was in shock.

We know that Mary is not the only one. The Department for Work and Pensions failed to record how many letters were returned undelivered, and no further action was taken to trace women who had not received letters. A few years previously, Mary’s mother had become ill, and Mary had had to choose between going part time and giving up her management position to care for her mum, or continuing to work and sorting out carers. Mary believed at the time that she only had a few years until she could draw her pension, so she decided to go part time and care for her mother in the last few years of life.

Because of Mary’s decision to care for her mum and go part time, her work pension is vastly reduced. Mary is so broken by grief that she cannot work. She is watching her husband decline, and she faces her retirement as a widow. Knowing that her pension would change would not have stopped what happened to her son, husband or mother, but it would have enabled her to have made an informed choice about whether to have continued in full-time employment. That could have resulted in her facing retirement as a widow in a situation much more comfortable than the one she now faces.

Millions of women across the country are living in financial difficulty because of the mismanagement of the changes, having made important life decisions in the expectation of receiving their pensions at age 60. I accept that even a Labour Government cannot change what happened to Mary, but I strongly believe that it is the job of every Government—no, of every person—to reach out a hand to help people back up when they have been knocked down by life. The Government can dress this up in any way they like, but we all know that an injustice has been done to 1950s women such as Mary. Now they must right that wrong by introducing transitional arrangements for all the women affected.

2.10 pm

**Stephen Lloyd** (Eastbourne) (LD): First, I thank the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) very much for securing the debate. One of his key, salient

points was the complete failure of Governments—plural—to communicate the changes. Initially, there was the Pensions Act 1995; afterwards, there were the Labour Governments and the coalition. As I have flagged up in the House before, all of us are culpable—all the political parties let women down.

From 1995 to 2009, there was no communication at all from the Department for Work and Pensions to the women affected, some of whom are in the Gallery—14 years during which Governments could have told them exactly what was happening; that way, at least, there would have been time for them to prepare. That did not happen, which is why so many women justifiably feel so frustrated, angry and hurt.

While the Minister is here, I want to make some specific proposals about what the Government can do. They are in charge and have the responsibility. First off, as the hon. Member for Easington said, there should be an opportunity for early access to pension credit. The Government should consider doing proper actuarial research into whether WASPI women should be able to take their pensions earlier, even if the amount is lower, and then to the higher amount by the time they reach 66.

There has to be a financial cost-benefit, not least because many WASPI women are facing real financial challenges. Whatever happens, the Government should seriously consider providing a flat sum of transition money, and I have a proposal about how they could do that. The Government absolutely insist that they are the party of aspiration—sometimes they are and sometimes they are not. Some of the shambles that I have seen since I was re-elected would indicate that they are not very good on aspiration. When she took over from David Cameron after the referendum, the Prime Minister said that she wanted to help those who are just about managing: she wanted to be there for the common man or woman.

One of the things that the Government are continuing to do—it happened in the recent Budget—is cut corporation tax. I have a proposal that I think a lot of businesses would accept, particularly the giant corporates: why not defray one year of corporation tax cut and use that money to ensure that WASPI women have a sufficient amount for a transition payment that makes things a little less difficult? I think that suggestion would fly in the House across party and out there, and I suspect that an awful lot of corporations would say, “Fine—we’ll do it. We appreciate that WASPI women have been short-changed because for more than a decade they were not informed, so we accept the proposal.” That is just an idea.

Last but not least, I have something else to put to the Minister. Seriously, it is time for the Government to allow not just debates—Backbench Business Committee or otherwise—but a votable motion. I say directly to the Minister: listen to people across the House and give us a proper vote on this issue. I believe that a lot of Government Back Benchers would support us.

2.14 pm

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): It takes a particular talent to transform a justice—the introduction of pensions equality for men and women—into a massive injustice for the 1950s women whom we are talking about. That is what has happened over the past three years. The righting

of a wrong has been turned into a new wrong, and everybody in the House, apart from a few people who want to be desperately loyal to the Government in their hour of need, says that the issue really needs resolving.

The injustice is twofold; it is not just the sudden speeding up of the process. When I wrote to the 3,000 women in the Rhondda who we thought might have been affected, I was amazed when people told me at a subsequent meeting, “You know what? The first time I realised that I was going to be affected was when I got a letter from you.” For heaven’s sake, the Government knew when the women were going to retire and had all the information, so they should have been getting in touch. This is not a partisan point—it is as true of the Labour Government as it is of the coalition and this Government. Nobody carried out the due diligence of making sure that all the women who were going to be affected knew that.

Just as I say to Great Western Railway every time it forgets to give us any information about the delayed train or whatever, one announcement or one letter is not enough. These are complicated matters. All too often, the post gets mixed up with something else or delivered to the wrong house. It was the Government’s job to make sure that everybody knew what was going to happen to them. It is one thing for a person to be told that in 30 or 15 years’ time their pension will not be what they thought it would be; it is quite another for them suddenly to discover, with moments to spare, that they will have to work extra years.

The people whom we are talking about in my constituency are women who have been absolutely dutiful—they have slaved their way through life. Many have worked since the age of 15, doing tough, often physically demanding jobs for minimal pay. The phrase they often use is “clapped out”. They say, “Frankly, I’m clapped out. I don’t have the energy to go on to some apprenticeship scheme or to do something else. I would if I could—that is in my nature—but there is just nothing left in me.” The situation feels like a terrible injustice.

There is another thing that I mention as the MP for the Rhondda. This is not something we are proud of, but it is just a fact: if we look at the map of deprivation across the country, we see that people in my constituency are paid less and have less money. They probably end up working many more hours than others simply to put food on the table. In a community such as mine, this issue makes a phenomenal difference, so the injustice is very toughly felt. People do not have savings to fall back on, lots of extra money or family members to turn to. Often this generation of women are looking after elderly relatives in their 80s and 90s as well. The issue is really having an impact on the whole of my community.

Finally, I pay enormous tribute to Dilys Jouvenat, who is running the campaign in the Rhondda. I know that the Minister is a decent man, but trying to tough the situation out for years and years and hoping that it will all go away is not going to work. The Rhondda women want justice—and by heaven, they’ll get it.

2.18 pm

**Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for his excellent work on this important and serious

[*Mohammad Yasin*]

issue that is facing some women in this country born in the 1950s. Five and a half thousand women in Bedford borough are affected by the pension changes, which were drawn up with little or no notice, and with no time being allowed for people to make alternative plans for such a life-changing event. I was very pleased to hear last week that Bedford Borough Council voted unanimously to support those women through the WASPI campaign. Depriving people of the money they have worked for and ought to have been entitled to is one of the greatest injustices imposed on a large section of our society.

But it is not just about the injustice. Women from the brilliant Bedford WASPI group told me that they have been robbed of their money, their independence, their pride, their future and even their homes. Some of those women are here today. Many women are destitute. I know of one woman who is now living in sheltered accommodation with her mother, because it was especially women on their own without the safety net of a partner's income who were simply unable to re-plan their lives with less than five—and sometimes less than two—years' notice.

The women I spoke to told me they were opposed not to the pension age going up, but to the way it was handled. The first shift in pension age was bad, but the second time the goalposts were moved, under the coalition Government, was the straw that broke the camel's back. One woman told me that although she tried to carry on working, health problems got the better of her and she could not carry on. She said that decades of working and looking after an elderly parent left her with nothing more to give. Her story is a common one, which was why hearing the Government telling women in their 60s who had worked all their lives to get on their bike and find another job was yet another insult.

One woman told me she was particularly upset that WASPI women were pitted against the younger generation, and made to feel greedy, or branded as scroungers, for fighting for the money they had saved for at a time when young people could not even afford a home. But she said that her grandchildren were right behind the WASPI campaign because they knew that fighting for her rights was also fighting for their future rights. Divide and rule is not working on this issue, and the Government need to understand that young people also feel very strongly about this on behalf of their grandparents.

Another woman said that the whole experience had made her feel less of a human being and that only the support of the WASPI movement, and the knowledge that millions of women feel the same way, had helped her to cope. The Government have yet to come up with one good reason not to award a non-means-tested bridging pension until the women affected reach state pension age as well as compensation for those who have already reached state pension age.

The WASPI women are asking for less than they are due, and it is about time they were given it.

2.22 pm

**Jo Platt** (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for securing this debate.

The Government's shambolic handling of this situation is the rightful source of much frustration and anger from women born in the 1950s. As we have heard from Members on both sides of the House, the lack of communication from previous Governments meant that a large proportion of women born in the 1950s received letters stating that their pension age had increased by six years only when they were 59, and therefore within a year of their expected retirement age of 60. From the stories I have heard, they were the lucky women, as some received no communication at all. If these women had been adequately informed, sufficient measures could have been put in place. I will be speaking on behalf of those women today.

I have heard at first hand from a woman in my constituency who has a disabled husband and therefore has been the breadwinner, despite being in a low-paid, physically demanding job. At 63, she still has to work every single weekend despite being in very poor health herself. She works weekends instead of resting, and then during the week, like most people of her age, she helps to care for her grandchildren, who live quite a distance away, to help her son and daughter-in-law with the cost of childcare. This woman never rests and is terrified of going off sick in case she loses her job.

Such stories are common throughout the country, particularly in places like Leigh where low-paid work is, unfortunately, commonplace. Had these women been able to plan for a late retirement, or received adequate support during their time of crisis, they might have been able to retain their independence.

The Government have been treating these women with total disregard. They have failed to show any sympathy to those who planned their entire lives around their state pension age only for the Government to start moving the goalposts. The total communication failure has resulted in understandable stress and anxiety, and this has already begun to have an effect on their livelihoods, families and health.

Fortunately in Leigh, our women born in the 1950s have become a support group for other women affected. The group is constituted and has become a support organisation. The women can talk with others in the same situation, help one another and plan for their futures, so I give particular credit the Leigh Pension Group. I know its members are watching this debate with great interest. They are an inspirational group to be around and I am sure the whole House will join me in thanking them for providing such fantastic support to the women affected.

On 19 January, Manchester will follow Leigh's example by lighting up the town hall in purple in support of our WASPI women. While that is only a small gesture, it is important that our communities show solidarity with the campaign and send the clear message to those affected: "We stand with you, and you will not be alone."

2.26 pm

**Thelma Walker** (Colne Valley) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for securing the debate.

I declare an interest because I am one of the women affected by these changes, as I was born in the 1950s—[*Interruption*—surprisingly, even unbelievably. But I

am not speaking in this debate just for myself; I am speaking for the 7,000 women in my constituency who have been affected by these shambolic changes, which the Government have brought in without due warning or notice.

We have heard time and again that Conservative Members care about 1950s WASPI women. They make impassioned speeches about the issue, but they then advise the women to take on an apprenticeship. I do not want to spend time focusing on those Members, however; instead, I will focus on the issue before us. But we all know that the way the Government chose to roll out these changes was just plain wrong.

We need only look back through the *Official Report* to see how often right hon. and hon. Members have spoken on the issue. Today, I would like to add my voice and tell the House about a constituent of mine, Susan, who lives in Colne Valley. When Susan was 49, she injured herself at work. She tried to work for several years, but had to leave—she just could not manage. Susan was meant to get her pension at 60. Then the age was moved back to 62, and now it is 65.

Susan gets £535 a month from a private pension. She is also a carer for her mother, and she earns £63 per week for 36 hours' care. Susan has £800 per month to live on. Of that, £114 goes to paying council tax, and £80 is the cost of her bus fares to see her mum. After her expenses are taken out, Susan has £50 per week to live on. She usually eats Weetabix for her evening meal when she gets home, because that is all she can afford. She does not get a bus pass and she does not get a heating allowance. Susan is on her own, so she does not have support from a partner.

Can the Minister really tell me that these changes are not having a detrimental impact on Susan's quality of life? Let us all for a moment put ourselves in Susan's shoes as someone who, through no fault of their own, is unable to work and has no disposable income at the end of the month, while providing the vital service of being a carer for her mother.

Poverty for those affected by the state pension changes is a reality. No one in the UK should be facing a choice of heating or eating because of the changes this Government have made to the legislation. I say to them: do not ignore the voices of us 1950s women, because we are not going away—pay us what we are due.

2.29 pm

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am very pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), who spoke beautifully. I, too, am a 1950s woman, but I am speaking in the debate because this issue affects 6,300 of my constituents. We are all in favour of equalisation, but we need a proper transitional period. That is what these women have not been given and that is why it is unfair. They had no time to prepare, no time to save and their legitimate expectations have not been met. Some have lost significant amounts of money, even though they have been paying national insurance contributions for many years. Ministers say that this is because life expectancy is rising, and it is, but it is no use to a person born in 1953 to know that a baby born now will live to the age of 83. When they were born, the average life expectancy was 72. Let us look at the differences in life expectancy in different parts of

the country, and even in my constituency. In the most well-off ward, the healthy life expectancy is 71, but in Woodhouse Close and Shildon the healthy life expectancy is 55.

When I started work in 1979, I expected to retire next year aged 60, but now I have to work until 2024. The big difference between me and my constituents is that I started work aged 21, having stayed on at school and gone on to university. Many of my constituents started work on leaving school aged 15. Ruth started aged 15 and worked in local government and health. She has three children and six grandchildren. She thought she was retiring at 60 to look after her dear old mum. Now she has to go back to work to sustain her husband, her children and her mother. She asks, physically, emotionally and financially, where is the time, health and energy going to come from? Shawn is in the same situation. She has had three jobs to keep herself and her family. Aged 15, Pamela left school on the Friday and went to work on the Monday. Jane—the same. She worked 70 hours a week from the age of 15. She finished at 54 with a disability. Jane and Pamela exemplify those people who are being moved on to employment and support allowance. They are using up their savings, which they had put by for their retirement. They are not exceptional or unusual. The number of women aged over 60 on ESA has shot up fourfold.

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making some very powerful points that other Members have not yet made, especially with regard to women in the north-east where many of us are from. It is probably the same for Wales and other industrial heartlands. Women who have worked for almost 50 years are going to be in the position of having a very short life expectancy after they retire. Does she agree that that is so unfair?

**Helen Goodman**: I do. My overall message to Ministers is that they should stop looking at actuarial tables and start listening to the way lives are lived. I have more examples. Chris wanted to stay on at school and get more education, but her father made her go out to work aged 15. Sue, Jane, Diane, Judith and Jane all say the same thing. Jane has lost £48,000 through this and Dot says, quite simply, "I am so tired."

We need to be honest about this issue and look at it in a radical way. My Front-Bench colleague made many sensible suggestions, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris). We need to think in terms of a pensions system that takes account of when people started work. Obviously, a person who started work at 15 should not have to work 10 years longer to get their pension than a person who probably has better health and probably has an easier job, having carried on with their education into their mid-20s.

2.34 pm

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for securing this debate.

I was wondering what to say today, because I have spoken in every single WASPI debate since I was elected and I am struggling to find anything new. I would say that in their treatment of the WASPI women the Government are behaving like dodgy used-car salesmen.

[Patricia Gibson]

This is the political equivalent of being mugged in the street. I thought, “I know what I’ll do, I’ll talk about the injustice.” But the Government already know about the injustice. I am sure the Minister is going to trot out the old arguments about people living longer. Actually, that is no longer true, because life expectancy is in decline. Whether we are living to 80 or 150 is not the point at issue today. The point is that the WASPI women were not given proper notice. That is the issue today and that is the issue I would really like the Minister to focus on.

I was also going to talk about the hardship and the penury in which these women have been placed, but the Government and the Minister know about that—they have heard it time and again. I was also going to talk about the cruelty of moving somebody’s pension age further and further away every time they approach it, but of course the Minister knows about that as well. He has heard it a dozen times. I could also talk, as many other Members have, about the caring responsibilities these women have taken on, but the Minister knows about that, as well as everybody else in the Chamber.

What I will talk about briefly is the social contract. Members have talked about what this will cost and asked, “Can we afford it?” I suggest to the Minister that we cannot afford not to address this matter. This goes to the heart of the social contract between those govern us and those who are governed by us. If people cannot have faith in the contract they have with those they elect to represent them, where can they find justice and support? The Government have cruelly and callously ripped up that social contract. The hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), who is no longer in her place, talked about WASPI women as though they are some kind of burden on the state. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The Minister and other Members have spoken about apprenticeships. There might be some WASPI women out there who are terribly excited at the prospect of a £3.50 an hour apprenticeship, but I just have not met them. Perhaps the Minister has. Perhaps his colleagues who have been lauding that have met them. WASPI women are not interested in whether they will get a telegram from the Queen. The fact is that that does not pay the bills and it does not put food on the table. Unless the card is edible, it is not much use.

We need to stick to the matter at hand. These women have been let down. They have been sold a pup. They are now living in hardship through no fault of their own. It really is time the Government recognised that in contrast to their impassive, stubborn and unfeeling lack of response, the WASPI women are showing dignity and fortitude. Everybody watching this debate can see the difference between the two camps. I urge the Minister to get a grip, do the right thing and give these women the money they are entitled to.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. Before I call Luke Pollard, I am sure that right hon. and hon. Members will be very pleased to hear that the Speaker of the Kosovo Parliament is with us. Welcome, Mr Speaker Veseli.

2.38 pm

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) not only for securing the debate, but for joining me on my Facebook Live last night to take questions from WASPI women in Plymouth.

First, I would like to declare an interest: I am the son of a WASPI woman and am very proud to be so.

There are so many WASPI women born in the 1950s who, instead of being treated with dignity in their retirement, are struggling to make ends meet, without enough money to spend on food or to heat their homes. They have worked hard all their lives, paid their taxes, raised children, contributed to society, cared for their loved ones and believed that when they retired the state would honour the obligations set out to support them. That has not happened, which is a disgrace.

In Devon, there are 78,000 WASPI women who deserve pensions justice. Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly have a further 33,000 women in that situation. In Plymouth, there are 8,000 WASPI women. As the only Plymouth MP here today, I speak not only for the 5,703 WASPI women in Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, but for all of them. All these women deserve justice for their pensions, which have been stolen by this Government. Since standing to be a Member of Parliament, I have found the WASPI campaigners to be decent and honourable women who are passionate and determined to get justice. Jackie, Morticia and so many others are an inspiration. But, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) said, there are many WASPI women who are not here to see this debate. They are not clustered together in trade unions or around computer monitors looking at the internet, because they have lost their battles. They are no longer here, and they were denied pensions justice.

Many WASPI women were not previously active campaigners or political activists. It is so important to stress that these incredible campaigners did not choose or want to have the life of an activist, as many of us in this place have chosen. I am sure that many would have enjoyed a quiet life in retirement with their pension, embarking on the plans that many had taken years to prepare, but the injustice that they face has been sprung on them. It has forced them to stand up and campaign on this issue. These women are the same generation that fought for equality and against poverty. Now they are fighting for the very justice that they deserve in retirement—a decent pension.

I have spoken to many brave WASPI women and campaigners in Plymouth and across the far south-west, such as Bernice, Val and Jackie. They wanted to share their stories so that they could be heard. There are so many women who saved, put aside and hoped for dignity in retirement, but who face poverty and humiliation. A point raised by many Members on both sides of the House is that these WASPI women are proud. They wanted to do the right thing and they thought that they had been doing the right thing, only to find out at the last moment that them doing the right thing was, in fact, actually not right, because the Government failed to communicate to them. They are proud women who have worked hard, and they deserve a decent pension.

**Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Luke Pollard:** I will not. I apologise, but I do not have much time.

The WASPI women have been betrayed. They have been robbed of their dignity and were insulted when they needed help from the Government. I believe the Minister to be a good man who has taken a lot of stick on this matter, so he is in the perfect position to give the WASPI women hope, although his comments on apprenticeships have not built trust in this Government.

Let there be no more debates after today, and no more excuses. Let us have a decent settlement for women. The Minister and the Government are on the wrong side of history. These WASPI women are not going away. They will fight on; they will not tire; and they will not give up. As the son of a WASPI woman, let me say that neither will I.

2.42 pm

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I stand to speak again on behalf of the 6,500 women affected in my constituency. I would also like to pay tribute to the campaigns up and down the United Kingdom, including by my local Ayrshire WASPI group.

In the last debate on this matter, I compared the different world that many Tories live in with the real world, and then—right on cue—up popped the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), arguing that women aged 65 should be able to get apprenticeships. It beggars belief to think that that is a credible option. It is even worse given that year-one apprentices over the age of 19 are entitled to a minimum wage of only £3.50 an hour. In the same debate, giving bus passes at an earlier age was also considered to be some mitigating concession, but that would go no way to make up for this injustice. In Scotland, the Scottish National party Government already give bus passes at the age of 60, so that measure would do nothing for women in Scotland. While I was thinking about these things yesterday, I got an email from the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), who is looking to raise funds to bring back the Royal Yacht Britannia. You could not make it up—that is actually considered to be a serious campaign when there are all these other injustices.

In the real world, life expectancy has dropped this year for the first time in decades, as actuaries have shown. In the real world, *The BMJ* report estimates that 120,000 deaths are attributable to Tory austerity measures. In this real world that I live in, I get notified of a WASPI woman, suffering from cancer, who is likely going to lose her house. Her husband is stressed by having to work much longer to try to keep the household going. Meanwhile, her MP, the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), has confirmed in writing to another Ayrshire WASPI woman that

“in Government difficult decisions have to be made and whilst in opposition you can promise the earth but do not need to deliver it”.

No one here is promising the earth. We want justice for these women. They should get the money that they are entitled to.

The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock also says that he believes

“that successive Governments have taken adequate steps to inform the public about these changes”.

That is effectively saying that it is these women’s fault that they did not know about the changes. No one can credibly say that successive Governments have notified the women properly. Then there is the myth the Tory Government mitigated the impact on those most affected by the Pensions Act 2011. That is like saying that the school bully only took £2 rather than the £3 they demanded, so it is therefore a £1 mitigation measure. That is not mitigation at all.

In the wider world of the Scottish Tories, they argue, on some technicality, that the Scottish Government have the powers to do something about the situation. The Scottish Parliament does not have the competence to deal with pensions. At the same time, the Scottish Government’s budget has been cut by £2.5 billion and the Scottish Government are having to mitigate the effects of other measures, including bedroom tax and council tax. It was Westminster that refused to devolve pensions and voted against full fiscal autonomy for Scotland, so there is no way that the blame can be levelled at the Scottish Government.

There have been arguments about how much mitigation measures may cost and the Government have queried the independent report commissioned by the SNP that said that such measures would cost £8 billion. In the last debate, the Government Minister threw in the figure of £70 billion for good measure as an estimate of the cost of reversing the Pensions Act 2011 and the Pensions Act 1995, even though we did not call for that. I have updated figures from the Library on the Government’s tax giveaways such as corporation tax, inheritance tax, savings concessions and the higher tax threshold, extrapolated until the year 2025. These will cost the Treasury £63 billion. Corporation tax giveaways until 2025 will cost £50 billion. There is the solution. It is staring the Minister in the face. These are the choices that the Government have to make.

2.46 pm

**Laura Pidcock** (North West Durham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for securing this debate. My mam is a WASPI woman. As the daughter of a WASPI woman, worse than the so-called burden on my generation or younger generations is seeing my mam not getting what she deserves, and the consequences of that, so I definitely do not see it as a burden.

There is an overwhelming case to reach a compensatory and transitional arrangement for women who were born in the 1950s—women who, through no fault of their own, have been robbed of a decent retirement. However, despite this long debate, I am sure that those women do not feel as though their voices will be heard by this Government. We will see when the Minister rises to his feet. If the hardship was really heard, the Government would take action.

I asked women to share their experiences, and they were stark and heartbreaking. Contrary to the comments on the Government Benches about the individualised nature of these experiences, there were patterns. It was a collective experience. For example, it is clear and cannot be disputed that these women have been left without information by the Department for Work and Pensions. The word that they used repeatedly about how they felt was “cheated”. The lack of notification has consequences; that is clear and cannot be disputed.

[*Laura Pidcock*]

Women who often started work at the age of 15 have been suddenly asked to rip up their retirement plans and scratch around to make a living. Because of those new and sudden realities, they have been forced into often back-breaking temporary zero-hours work with no security or job satisfaction just to make it through to their retirement age. Illness has made them desperate and trapped, and having to search for ways to make ends meet is frightening in this new financial environment. Financial insecurity and poverty have caused many to experience acute mental health problems. Caring responsibilities have left them exhausted and with gaps in their pensions through no fault of their own.

Overall, these women, who have worked all their lives and have not had the advantages of many in this place—and for many, life has been a struggle—have felt utterly let down by the DWP, by their representatives in the House, and by the Government. What happens in this place has massive consequences.

This is one woman's reality. She says that she is living from "hand to mouth". It really is about whether she can "heat or eat". She writes:

"I am not in the best of health...If I am unwell and cannot work I don't get paid. I should not be in this position! I should have been informed years ago of the massive increase in state pension age! An additional six years to work is...unfair, it's the best part of a decade and that means a lot when you're in your 60s! I feel hopeless and frustrated. What will my health be like in another four years' time? Will I ever get to enjoy my retirement?"

Those words are truly heartbreaking, and there are thousands of similar stories from thousands of women in my constituency.

These women want to know where their money is. They want to know how a contractual relationship with the state can just be ripped up. They want to know how there can be no consequences for the administrative inadequacies of the state. They know, deep down, that where there is a will there is a way. I say to the Government: please give these women the future that is rightfully theirs. When they do win, they will not be grateful, but they will be glad that they did not give up.

2.50 pm

**Mhairi Black** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I too woke up this morning and thought, "What the hang am I going to say?" I have said everything multiple times, and there are only so many ways you can state the same facts.

I had an email from a lady called Hazel. She said that, just out of curiosity, she wanted to look at the old TV adverts for the multi-million-pound campaign that the Government had apparently launched. Given that we have focused so much on communication today, I think this is a very valid point. Hazel showed me various adverts; having searched the whole archive, we could find three. The first was presumably aimed at women. It is very patronising, as is the one that is aimed at guys.

Two dogs are talking to each other in a field. One says that it is very confused by pensions because there are so many different types. The other dog says, "Well, the Government have this great new handbook that you can request to be sent to you." The punchline is "Is that

you a guide dog now?" Oh, the banter. That is very good, right? But it was not adequate in the slightest when it came to getting across to people the grave changes that were being made.

My favourite is the third advert. It is only 10 seconds long, and half of it shows a dog chasing its own tail. There is no dialogue whatsoever. That summed up, for me, the Government's reactions to this entire saga. They are just spinning in the one circle, refusing to acknowledge the facts that people are pointing out to them.

I raised that for two reasons. First, it is the only new thing that I have to add, and secondly, the onus is still on the women to request the information. The onus is still on them to go and find out what the Government might or might not be up to with their pensions.

It is incredible that we are still having to have this debate. As far as I am aware, this is the 13th in which I have taken part since I was elected, and I know that there were others before that. The key issue is that at no point have these changes been explicitly mentioned, and at no point have they been communicated to the women affected.

Until the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), I thought that everyone here agreed that there was poor communication for many years. I think that that still stands. It is a historical fact that both Labour and Conservative Governments totally ignored the problem and, to an extent, there is still a huge communication problem that we have to look at.

From the admission that there is a communication problem, we can safely draw two conclusions. The first, which is the more important, is that the women are utterly blameless. The second is that it is actually an admission of guilt on the Government's part. It is a recognition that the institution of government has failed those same women again and again.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) said earlier that the 2011 Act had been rushed, and I agree with him. It was shoved in at the last minute. Then, all of a sudden, people said, "Wait a second: there is a 1995 Act. Oh my God, this has kicked off." Instead of doing the sensible thing and saying, "Let us step back and see what we can do to soften the blow," the Government decided to vamp ahead with it anyway. Can we deal with the fact that the job of current Governments is to fix the mistakes made by previous Governments? That is what we are all here for. We are trying to move society forward, and it is not going to get anywhere if the response is always, "We looked at that; it is rubbish, but let us move on." However, that is all that we are getting from the Government. We can shout about whose fault this is until we are a Tory shade of blue in the face, but it will not fix a damn thing. I recognise that the Government have made slight concessions to the 2011 Act. That gave some women an extra few months, but it was a wholly inadequate response because it totally neglected the chaos that started back in 1995, and the huge leap that nobody knew about. Can we focus on how to fix the issue now, rather than getting drawn into the blame game of whose fault it is or is not?

As has been mentioned, the SNP produced a report that did the Government's job for them. It stated that with £8 billion spent across five years—one whole Parliament—things could effectively revert back to the

original timetable of the 1995 Act. That would allow a lot of breathing space for a lot of women, especially those worse affected. The national insurance fund has a surplus of £23 billion. People can disagree with that all they want—I am happy to talk to them afterwards.

**James Cartlidge** *rose*—

**Mhairi Black:** I am about to come specifically to the hon. Gentleman. He mentioned the problems faced by the pensions system, and I completely agreed with the spirit of his speech. I understand that Gordon Brown had a field day with the pensions pot and made things a hell of a lot more complicated for everybody. I accept that as reality and a historical fact. However, the fact that I agree with the hon. Gentleman about those grave concerns shows why we need to fix this problem. We always hear the argument about it being unfair to put costs on to the younger generations because they are the ones who will be footing the bill—the pay-as-you-go system that the hon. Gentleman referred to. I am from that generation, and I am looking at this problem and thinking: these women have done nothing wrong, yet the Government are still able to afford all these things that I really do not think are that important. Are the Government really not going to act because of me? Wait a second—why should I be paying national insurance, if at the last hurdle the Government can change the rules and move the goalposts? Why should my generation take anything that the Government say seriously? We must be grown up about this—I can't believe I have to say that in here—and we need to address and fix this problem. This is above party politics, so let us be practical.

Where the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) and I will disagree is when I say that this comes down to tough political choices. The Government have a deal with the DUP to maintain power, and billions of pounds are being spent on Trident. There is the refurbishment for this place, and we have heard about some ridiculous campaigns for boats and royal yachts and so on. I am sorry, but those things are not the priority right now. These women entered a contract—national insurance is a contract; it is a basic fundamental of our welfare state as it functions. We cannot undermine that, yet that is all the Government are serving to do. If this were a private company it would, rightly, be getting dragged through the courts right now, and the Government should reflect on that.

The hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) said that section 28 of the Scotland Act 2016 gives the Scottish Parliament the power to mitigate these changes. I have a problem with that argument because section 28 of that Act states that we cannot give pension assistance or assistance by “reason of old age”. We are not allowed to do that—pensions are completely reserved, and when we campaigned for the devolution of pensions we were told no.

**Douglas Ross:** Does the hon. Lady also agree that an SNP Government Minister stated in a letter to the UK Government about the WASPI women:

“I accept that ‘old age’ is not defined in the legislation, and that most people would not regard this age group as old”?

When she speaks about pensions, does she agree that these women are not pensioners because they have not received their state pension? There may be an opportunity to use that—an opportunity, that is all I ask.

**Mhairi Black:** I appreciate what the hon. Gentleman says, but the WASPI women are not receiving a pension because the UK Government will not give them one, so that is a ridiculous notion. I commend the hon. Gentleman because he supported us during an Opposition-day debate. That was commendable and brave, so fair play to the guy, but that is a totally ludicrous point of view and I will explain why.

As I have said—I am coming to a conclusion, Madam Deputy Speaker—I disagree with Labour on constitutional grounds, but that is because I want to cut out the middle man. This is the perfect example of why I support independence. Why are we paying taxes to come to London to be told by a Conservative Government what we can and cannot spend the money on? The irony is that, when those policies start to take effect, the Government turn round and say, “We want the Scottish Government to fix it.” I don't think so! If they want to devolve pensions, great. Until then, this is a UK problem and a Conservative problem, and it is not going away. It has to be fixed, and it has to be fixed soon as. Do the right thing.

2.59 pm

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing this important debate, and I am absolutely delighted to be able to speak in support of his motion. We have had an excellent and passionate debate with some fantastic contributions, and I would like to thank each and every one of them. On the whole, it has been completely cross-party, recognising the real injustice that women born in the 1950s have been dealt. There can be no doubt that women have borne the brunt of this Government's cuts over the past seven years, but that applies particularly to women born in the 1950s, who have been dealt a real injustice with the accelerated increase in their state pension age.

**Lilian Greenwood:** Does my hon. Friend agree that it is absolutely no surprise that 1950s women such as my constituents Jane Yates and Glenys Daly feel robbed? They have worked hard for 45 years and they say that their bodies are giving up, yet they cannot get the pensions that they have paid for.

**Debbie Abrahams:** There are so many cases like theirs, and I shall touch on a couple of them, if I may.

Women born in the 1950s have had their state pension age quietly pushed back, many without receiving any notice. They expected to retire at 60, only to find that they had three or more years to wait. In spite of some appalling stories of the dire circumstances that some of these women are facing, the Government have still refused to provide any transitional support. During our national pensions tour, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) and I started this summer, we have heard from many women who are not only struggling but facing destitution. I shall mention a couple of cases, all anonymous of course. The first woman states:

“I've been paying national insurance for 43 years, but have no private pension or anything else for that matter. I've supported 2 children on my own salary as a divorced, single parent. I had no notification of the 1995 Act but in Feb 2012 I was told that my retirement date was May 2019. I'll be 65 and 4 months. I've worked,

[Debbie Abrahams]

got extra qualifications, had good jobs, but at 63 I am unemployed and am claiming JSA which finishes soon. I've little savings. Have applied for over 40 jobs since Sept. I'm at my wits end".

The second woman states:

"I don't remember ever getting a letter saying my pension age had changed. I'm disabled and have had a lot of stressful things going on in the last few years. Incapacity Benefit changing to ESA and worrying about that, then the bedroom tax and having to downsize, then news that DLA is changing. The change in State Pension Age just sort of crept in there and came to my attention when WASPI highlighted it. I kept hearing the words that no one will wait longer than 18 months! Then I realised not only would I not get a state pension when I was 60 but also the winter fuel allowance and bus pass would be affected. I'm tired of not mattering."

Those women deserve more than this.

As we have heard, many of these women have had to rely on the wider social security system beyond the state pension to survive. This means that if they are claiming jobseeker's allowance or universal credit, they will be expected to undertake 35 hours a week of job search activity, or be sanctioned. I would be grateful if the Minister commented on the recommendation in the final report of John Cridland's review of the state pension age, which suggests that older jobseekers should be required to find only part-time work. Do the Government support that recommendation?

When the plight of women born in the 1950s was first raised by Women Against State Pension Inequality and various other groups two years ago, they stated that 3.8 million women were affected by the lack of notice of the changes in the Pensions Acts of 1995 and 2011. The change in the 2011 Act affected 2.7 million women, of whom only 150,000 have reached their revised state pension age to date. By 2026, they will all have retired. Those women feel palpable and justifiable anger. As they have said, they have done the right thing. They have worked all their lives, paid into the system for decades, cared for their children and cared for their parents, only for the goalposts to be moved. Many are seeking legal redress against the Government. They need action now, not in 10 or 20 years' time.

Labour has presented two options that the Government could take forward now. The first, which was included in our manifesto, is the extension of pension credit to those most badly affected by the accelerated increase in the state pension age, enabling them to get additional support based on the 1995 state pension age timetable. That would provide approximately half a million women on the lowest incomes with up to £159 a week. We have repeatedly called on the Government to implement those costed measures—about £800 million, as my hon. Friend the Member for Easington mentioned—but they have sadly refused to act.

Our manifesto commitment said that we would consider other options as well, and I set out an additional option at conference that would give women the opportunity to retire up to two years early, rather than as expected under the Government's plans. Given that the Government have so far refused to set aside additional expenditure, we felt that it was imperative to present cost-neutral proposals, so that there was no excuse to rule it out. Under the second option, women born in the 1950s would see a small reduction of 6% in their weekly state pension entitlement for each year that they retired early.

Based on the state pension today, a woman retiring a year early would receive £149.98 a week instead of £159.55. That option would be available to all those waiting to retire—around 2.6 million women. However, as I said then and want to reiterate now, that proposal is a starter. It is to complement additional action on transitional protections. These women need action now, and the Government could introduce these options now, which also do not preclude compensation. We want to continue working with women to right the wrong that they have been done.

Labour's options were developed after listening to women and men as part of the national state pension tour to discuss the future of our state pension system. We also met the various 1950s women lobby groups, and something that struck us profoundly was the urgency for many women. They need something now and cannot wait six months, let alone three, four or five years. As we all know, most 1950s-born women will retire in the next few years, so something needs to happen now, but this Government have ignored their pleas for help and have ignored the tangible measures that could be taken. Their approach is not only morally bankrupt and shows that they have no commitment to tackling burning injustices, but, given the prospect of a lengthy and costly court battle as women seek compensation for the years that they have lost, it is also extremely foolhardy.

Last week, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North challenged the Government on their contingency planning in the event of the courts awarding compensation to the affected women. The Minister said the Government believed that they were on firm ground, but history is littered with court and other decisions when injustice has been proved and Governments have had to pay up. It is clear that this Government have even less support in the House for their position on 1950s women than they do for a meaningful vote on the negotiated settlement with the EU, so I ask the Minister to work with us and with these women on a comprehensive set of bridging arrangements now.

3.8 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman):** I congratulate my good friend the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing today's debate on the state pension age and the 30-odd colleagues who have spoken.

The decisions by successive Governments concerning the rise in the state pension age were reached by reason of equality legislation, increased life expectancy and sustainability of the state pension. Since world war two, we have seen huge changes in life expectancy. Thanks to a better NHS, changes in the job market and improvements in medicine, there have been improvements for men and women such that they are living longer, staying healthier for longer, and leading far more active lifestyles, regardless of age. People living and staying healthier for longer is to be welcomed, but the Government must not ignore the fact that it also brings enormous financial and demographic pressures. The key choice that a Government face when seeking to control state pension spend is to increase the state pension age or pay lower pensions, with an inevitable impact on pensioner poverty. The only alternative is to ask the working generation to pay an ever larger share of their income to support pensioners,

as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) made clear in her speech.

In July 2017, the Government published their first review of the state pension age, which set out a coherent strategy targeted at strengthening and sustaining the UK state pension system for many decades to come. It accepts the key recommendation of John Cridland's independent review, which was to increase the state pension age from 67 to 68 between 2037 and 2039.

The review is clear about increasing life expectancy and the challenges it poses. People are living longer. Almost 6,000 people in the UK turned 100 in 2016, compared with 3,000 in 2002. By 2035, there will be more than twice as many people over 100 as there are now.

**Stephen Lloyd:** What does the Minister have to say about my two specific asks? First, the Government should give us a meaningful vote on this, because I know there is a lot of support on the Government Back Benches. Secondly, rather than giving one year of the corporation tax cut to business, I think business will be happy to give the money to WASPI women.

**Guy Opperman:** The hon. Gentleman and I both voted for the 2011 Act to increase the state pension age, with the circumstances that apply, after much consideration of the variety of options that had been proposed. He and I, and certainly the Scottish National party and the Scottish Government, have differing views on taxation, such as on whether it should support Trident, but, with respect, the tax reduction he proposes would reduce the job-creating power of the businesses upon which we rely for the jobs and public services we all wish to support.

**Debbie Abrahams:** Will the Minister acknowledge that, two days before John Cridland's report was released, data showed that life expectancy at 60 is actually going down and life expectancy at birth is flat-lining? This is the only developed country where that is happening.

**Guy Opperman:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that specific point, because I genuinely believe she is scaremongering—[*Interruption.*] Oh, yes. On the issue of life expectancy, there are two fundamental sources. The first is the ONS, which has repeatedly made it clear that life expectancy is rising across the board. We cannot get away from the fact that the ONS reported only this month that life expectancy continues to rise.

The Labour party manifesto sought an independent review of all aspects of the state pension age. Well, the Government did that with the Cridland report, which makes it critically clear that life expectancy has increased. Life expectancy at birth in 2016, for example, was 91 years for females and 89 years for males. In 50 years' time, by 2066, life expectancy at birth in the UK is projected to rise to 98 years.

Healthy life expectancy has also been increasing in recent decades. Healthy life expectancy at 65, as a proportion of total life expectancy, has been relatively stable since 2000. Healthy life expectancy at 65, according to the latest ONS statistics, has been increasing in Scotland in recent years, as has disability-free life expectancy.

**Patricia Gibson:** Will the Minister give way?

**Guy Opperman:** If the hon. Lady will bear with me, I will answer her point.

In relation to specific areas of Scotland, the long and short of it is that I do not have the life expectancies for specific constituencies, as has been asked for, but in the Glasgow city area, for example, life expectancy at birth, according to the December 2017 ONS figures, has increased by more than four years for men. Life expectancy at 65 in Glasgow city is 15 years for men and 18 years for women, an increase on 2001 to 2003. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) asserts from a sedentary position that I am using the wrong data. The data I am using is what the Office for National Statistics has said and from the Cridland report.

**Patricia Gibson** *rose*—

**Guy Opperman:** I am conscious of your restrictions on the length of time available to me, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will come back to the hon. Lady in a moment, if she will allow me.

The state pension was initially addressed in the 1995 Act. The need to do so arose because of life expectancy changes and the anticipated increase in the number of pensioners in the years to come. As I have said, the Labour Government introduced the Pensions Act 2007, which again increased the state pension age. I should point out that the Labour party has now resiled from that position and seeks to argue that both the Blair and Brown reforms were wrong.

The Government listened to concerned voices during the passage of the 2011 Act, as I indicated to the hon. Member for Easington. The proposed two-year acceleration was reduced to 18 months, benefiting more than a quarter of a million women, with the concession being worth more than £1 billion. Going as far as some campaigners have argued—he mentioned early-day motion 63 and what he described as “full compensation”—would represent a cost of more than £70 billion to the public purse. With respect, the requirements those changes would make in relation to taking into account the difference between men and women would require new legislation, meaning that an ongoing inequality would potentially be created between men and women.

**Patricia Gibson:** Perhaps the Minister could offer me some assistance. He talks about life expectancy increasing, and I do not want to argue the toss about whether it is or is not. I am curious about something, and I hope he will be able to explain this to me. Just because people are living longer, I do not understand why this particular generation of women should pay the price, given that they expected to receive their pensions at 60. The argument about life expectancy might be one about reforming pensions in the future, but we are talking about this particular group of women, who feel very let down and cheated because at 60 they have not got their pension.

**Guy Opperman:** I am conscious of Madam Deputy's Speaker's desire that I should end my speech speedily, so I will write to the hon. Lady with a detailed reply to the point she just raised.

[Guy Opperman]

I have barely had a chance to address the arguments made by my hon. Friends from Scotland, which include the point raised eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) that Jeane Freeman, my opposite number as Pensions Minister in Scotland, has indicated that her Government have the powers to act under sections 24, 26 and 28 of the Scotland Act 2016. I stress the point strongly that there is no question but that they have this power, because this is not about dealing with pensioners as such; the provisions we are dealing with concern people who are of working age, according to the law. I rely strongly upon the words not of this Government but of the Scottish Government, as set out in her letter of 22 June.

The issue of notification was raised, and I can answer the points on that briefly. Clearly, there was massive parliamentary debate, on repeated occasions, in 1995. Thereafter, we saw multiple articles in the press and media; the distribution of a huge number of leaflets; a campaign in 2004 to educate people about their state pensions; adverts in a variety of ways; correspondence in two different ways, both prior to 2010 and after 2011; and state pension forecasts sent to 19 million people over the past 17 years.

I wish to make a couple of final points. We recognise that some men and women are forced to reduce their working hours or cannot work for reasons of sickness, disability or caring responsibilities. The Government are committed to supporting the vulnerable, and we spend about £50 billion a year on benefits to support disabled people, those with health conditions and carers, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) particularly mentioned. That equates to 6% of all Government spending. With increased financial pressures, we cannot change a policy that was implemented over 22 years ago and supported by all three political parties.

I finish with a point about life expectancy, as the hon. Member for Easington and I are good examples of that—we have both suffered from cancer. I am delighted to see that he has made a recovery from lymphatic cancer. I have made a recovery from a brain tumour. Those illnesses would have killed us both 30 to 40 years ago. There is no question but that the life expectancy changes are what has driven this approach on the part of successive Governments. With increased financial pressures, it would be unaffordable and not right, in the light of the changes we have had, to place an unfair financial burden on future generations.

3.19 pm

**Grahame Morris:** I thank the more than 30 Members who have participated in the debate, either directly through speeches or in the numerous interventions. I hope that the Minister has taken note of what has been said. I am an eternal optimist, perhaps formed by my experiences, and I think that all sides are going to build momentum and bring this campaign to a successful conclusion. I point out to the Minister, with all due respect, that if the maladministration cases are found against the Government, we could be looking at a huge settlement, so it may well be in the Minister's interests and those of the Government to seek a parliamentary solution. These women, many of whom were in the Gallery today, deserve justice, and we are here to try to deliver that. I hope that Parliament will speak with one voice in support of the motion.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House calls on the Government to publish proposals to provide a non-means tested bridging solution for all women born on or after 6 April 1950 who are affected by changes to the State Pension age in the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts.

## Hormone Pregnancy Tests

3.20 pm

**Sir Mike Penning** (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House regrets that the terms of reference for the Commission on Human Medicines Expert Working Group on Hormone Pregnancy Tests asked the Commission to consider evidence on a possible association between exposure in pregnancy to hormone pregnancy tests and adverse outcomes in pregnancy, but the Commission's Report concluded that there was no causal association between the use of hormone pregnancy tests and babies born with deformities between 1953 and 1975, even though it was not asked to find a causal link; believes that the inquiry was flawed because it did not consider systematic regulatory failures of the Committee on Safety in Medicines and did not give careful consideration to the evidence presented to it; and calls on the Government, after consultation with the families affected so they have confidence in the process, to establish a Statutory Inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005 to review the evidence on a possible association with hormone pregnancy tests on pregnancies and to consider the regulatory failures of the Committee on Safety in Medicines.

I think we all, as constituency MPs, would have hoped that this debate was unnecessary. We all hoped that the "inquiry"—I use the word advisedly—that the Government constituted in good faith would give confidence to the families and loved ones of thousands—[*Interruption.*] Shall I pause while the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) stops laughing?

**Mhairi Black** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): No, I was talking to my colleagues.

**Sir Mike Penning:** Thousands of people went in good faith to see their GP because they thought they might be pregnant. That is probably the most important time in any woman's life. Certainly, as the father of two gorgeous girls, the most important time in my life was when my wife told me that she was expecting our children. It was so important to these families that often they went to their GP, which is a natural thing to do, so we had an NHS patient going to an NHS surgery to see an NHS doctor for advice about whether they were pregnant.

Look at the dates for when these potential mothers-to-be went to see their GP: between 1953 and 1975. That is quite a span of time. My mother could have gone to her GP then, because I was born in 1957. In many ways, it could easily have been me who was a victim of this—God forbid—and my mother would have been a victim as well. That is one of the reasons why I am so passionate about getting to the bottom of the disaster that happened to these ladies who went to their GPs.

These women went to their NHS GP in an NHS surgery as an NHS patient, and very often that GP would open the drawer and give them a tablet—two sometimes—with no prescription or advice, and no concern about the consequences or side effects of the drug. The GPs handed the tablets over to the ladies, and many of them took them there in the surgery. The GP simply said, "If your period starts tomorrow, you're not pregnant. If your period doesn't start, you are." In good faith, which we all have for our GPs, the ladies followed that advice, even though the Department of Health and the drug companies knew that there were issues with this drug.

I am going to use a tiny bit of privilege, because every time I look around for information to do with this subject, including in the House of Commons Library debate pack "Hormone pregnancy tests" and the "Report of the Commission on Human Medicines' Expert Working Group on Hormone Pregnancy Tests", I see the phrase "hormone pregnancy tests". The drug was Primodos. It was made by a drug company and often given free to GPs, who then handed it out without a prescription to determine whether a lady was pregnant.

Other companies in the world knew that there were issues. I will not go into all the evidence that was given to the so-called review, but let me just touch on some of the things that Ministers asked for when the group was set up. The first point was that the Government should set up an expert working panel "inquiry". No such inquiry took place. At the third meeting, as I understand it, the barrister to the inquiry advised that the word "inquiry" should be changed to "review". Under whose authority? When a Minister sets up an inquiry, should there not be an inquiry? Perhaps those people did not want an inquiry, but who cares? They should have come back to the group—the victims—and, more importantly, to the Minister. They could have spelled out their advice and the Minister could have made a decision. Some might think that this is just semantics, but it is not. If people are trying to get to the truth, it is vital that they know what a group can do. Even when the report came out—not the original report, because that was removed and draft was changed, as others will mention—it did not say "review", because it was not a review.

There should be full disclosure and a review of all the evidence. That "review" said that it did that, but it did not. The Royal College of General Practitioners, to give just one example, informed the Department and the drug company that it had concerns way back in the 1960s, but its evidence was never sought. If Members read the report, they will find that no evidence at all from the Royal College of GPs was given to this review, which should have been an inquiry.

**Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab) *rose*—

**Sir Mike Penning:** I will give way, but I will only give way on a couple of occasions because I am conscious of the time and I want everybody to have the opportunity to speak.

**Margaret Greenwood:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Is he aware that *The BMJ* reported that most of the scientific evidence considered by the working group was from the 1960s, '70s and early '80s. One expert in the field, Dr Neil Vargesson of Aberdeen University, told *The BMJ* that there were not that many scientific studies available. Does he agree that the Government should fund new research with the aim of enabling a definitive conclusion to be reached?

**Sir Mike Penning:** Yes, I do, and I will come on to that point. It is vital that we have proper evidence, not some historical evidence that was used by the report. More modern evidence was rejected because it had not yet been peer reviewed. The whole point about having all the evidence is one reason why the motion under debate today, which I hope will be passed unanimously, actually says that there should be a judge-led inquiry so that all that evidence can be considered.

**Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con) *rose*—

**Sir Mike Penning:** I will give way to my hon. Friend and then I will make some progress.

**Mims Davies:** I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. I must acknowledge my constituent, Charlotte, and her family, who are here on behalf of her brother, Stephen, who has been greatly affected by this drug. One of the biggest issues is the way in which the drug was handed out with absolutely no discussion of the risks.

Jackie lost her baby, Louisa, 19 years later—in 1977. At that time, the product had been on the market for two years with Government warnings, but still GPs did not point that out to patients. There is a lot of evidence here, so why is it not in the report?

**Sir Mike Penning:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend. One thing that has surprised me is that although, on average, every single MP will have a victim of Primodos in their constituency, many of the victims think that what happened was their fault and that they are on their own. In the fantastic documentary on Sky, people came forward to say, “I have been affected by this, but I thought that I was on my own. I thought that I was the only one.”

**Mr George Howarth** (Knowsley) (Lab) *rose*—

**Sir Mike Penning:** Another point was that the inquiry should be conducted fairly and independently. Members should consider that for a few seconds and take a look at who was on the committee while I take an intervention from the right hon. Gentleman.

**Mr Howarth:** The right hon. Gentleman is making a very powerful case. Given that the inquiry/review has now been very much discredited—it has certainly been rejected by all of those who have suffered—does he agree, as I am sure he will, that the way forward is set out in his motion, which calls for a

“Statutory Inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005 to review the evidence on a possible association with hormone pregnancy tests on pregnancies and to consider the regulatory failures of the Committee on Safety of Medicines.”?

**Sir Mike Penning:** I praise the Clerks who helped me to draft the motion. I was very angry when we started drafting it, after reading the report, but they helped me get it into some kind of parliamentary language.

An inquiry has to be independent and judge-led, and it has to be able to subpoena people to give evidence before it on oath, so that we can get to the absolute truth. It also has to look at the regulatory system that was in place at the time. I am afraid that the Department of Health cannot hide behind this report. To me, that is vital.

Let us look again at the point about the inquiry being fair and independent. One of the ways we thought it could be independent and fair was to have an expert witness who was not part of the campaign, but whom everybody massively respected. For those of us who have been involved in the thalidomide campaign over the years, it was a really positive thing when we heard that Nick Dobrik’s name would be put forward.

Interestingly enough, although Nick was there as an expert witness, he was not asked to play a part in drawing up the conclusions in any shape or form. In fact, he was asked to leave the room. Nick was very surprised—actually, he was gobsmacked—when, in good faith, the Minister and then the Prime Minister said that Nick Dobrik had fully endorsed the conclusions of the report. I know now that the Minister and the Prime Minister know—I have met the Prime Minister, and Nick has done an interview with Sky today—that he categorically does not endorse the conclusions of the report. It was fundamentally wrong for anyone to advise the Prime Minister or the Minister that he did. He does not blame the Prime Minister; I do not think I blame the Prime Minister. As a former Minister—I know that there are former Ministers on the Opposition Benches—I know that we take advice from our officials and they tell us what the situation is. In good faith, the Minister at the urgent question, and the Prime Minister at Prime Minister’s questions, said that Nick endorsed the conclusions.

On behalf of Nick, who cannot defend himself in this Chamber, I would like whoever gave that advice to the Minister and the Prime Minister to formally apologise to Nick Dobrik. He is a fantastic campaigner not only for the Thalidomide Trust, but for all injustices, especially within the pharmaceutical area. The victims do not feel that the inquiry was fair and independent at all. They should have trust and confidence.

The most important thing is that the inquiry was asked to find a “possible” association—not “causal”, but “possible”. I and other members of the all-party group asked the experts from the panel why, after taking the word “inquiry” out, the remit was changed again, because “causal” is very difficult to prove. They said that they followed the science, but they were supposed to follow their remit and do what they were told. If they felt that they could not do that based on the evidence in front of them, fine. They could have gone back to the Minister and the victims and explained that. Instead, we had the farcical situation of the group looking for something when they knew full well—it is clearly in the documents—that they could not reach the conclusion that there was a causal link.

Interestingly enough, the group also could not come to the conclusion that there was not a causal link, because the evidence was not there for either conclusion. As I said during the exchanges on the urgent question, an injustice has taken place. Natural justice is the reason we are sent here. We defend our constituents when the system has come down against them and caused such horrific, horrible things to happen to them, so we need to address that injustice.

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Sir Mike Penning:** I will give way once more and then I will conclude to give other colleagues time to speak.

**Chris Elmore:** I am exceptionally grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. He says that everyone has constituents who have been affected. Two of my constituents have told me that they believe that they lost their children as a result of the drug. It is even more severe than losing a baby; one of them lost several children by taking the advice of their GP. This is a fundamental issue of

trust—trusting the GP, trusting the NHS and trusting the inquiry. All those things have failed. Both my constituents told me over and over, “We no longer have any faith in the system.” They believe that the report is a whitewash, which is why I wholeheartedly agree that there should be a full and frank inquiry.

**Sir Mike Penning:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support for the victims.

As I said earlier, there is no constituency in this country that does not have someone who lost their baby due to stillbirth or dying shortly after birth, or whose life was transformed—for those who survived. However, many people were advised to have an abortion, and the figures on that are not available to us. Reports that the inquiry was not allowed to have are starting to come through.

I fully endorse the fact that we need some money so that we can ensure that we have modern reports, because the methodologies used back then would never be allowed today. We also need to see the missing reports. We need to find the stuff that has gone missing in Germany, where the drug company knew there were issues. We need to know why the drug company settled in America—it was using a slightly different name for the product, but it was the same company. What evidence was put before the legal system in America, where the company settled as fast as possible, and then gagged everybody and kept everything quiet?

We have a duty in this House to call things into question when they go wrong. These things started going wrong many years ago—before I was born. I have been a Minister, so I know that Ministers have to support their Department, but one role of a Minister is to question the advice that they get. I know that that is what the Prime Minister is going to do now, and I hope the House will support the victims so that they can have some confidence in the system and the NHS once again.

**Several hon. Members** *rose—*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. We have a lot of people to get in and we have very limited time. Can I suggest six-minute speeches?

3.36 pm

**Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab):** Six years ago, I met my constituent Nichola Williams, who shared with me her struggle with her health over her lifetime. Her mother had been prescribed Primodos. From there, I carried out my research, searching for answers and going through thousands and thousands of pages of documents.

One document was a 1969 study by a Dr Norman Dean, who worked with the Royal College of General Practitioners. He found that when women used this hormone pregnancy test, there was a higher incidence of malformed babies, miscarriages, stillbirths and infant deaths. He found the findings so alarming that he wrote to the manufacturers advising them that Primodos should be withdrawn. However, it took another eight years for it to be finally taken off the market, unlike in Norway and Sweden, which apparently acted very swiftly.

In the last six years, I have exchanged countless letters with Ministers and Department of Health officials, working alongside Jason Farrell from Sky News, who has dedicated an enormous amount of time to exposing

this issue, and Marie Lyon, the chair of the victims association, who has tirelessly campaigned for justice. I have raised this matter on the Floor of the House many times. I raised it with the Prime Minister several weeks ago, and I also met her predecessor to discuss it.

In 2014, after a debate in this Chamber, we were informed by the then Minister that an inquiry would be carried out, and we were very excited about that. We were promised that the inquiry would be fair, open and transparent, would have the trust and confidence of all the victims and would look at all evidence. Instead, we found that some experts on the panel had conflicts of interest and close ties with the manufacturer, which is now Bayer.

The victims who were invited to give evidence were treated appallingly and were given a very short period—I think it was two hours—to explain what had happened to them. Ms Lyon, who had been appointed as an observer to the panel, was forced to sign a gagging clause, which meant she could not raise with us any of the concerns she had about how the inquiry was going.

**Mims Davies:** I thank the hon. Lady for mentioning the interest our Prime Minister has shown. She met Conservative Members recently, and she is watching with interest. However, the issue I would like to reiterate on behalf of my constituents and many other MPs is the treatment of the campaigners during this process. We had unacceptable timescales, and some of these people were caring for very ill children. The treatment of the campaigners, at the very least, needs some kind of apology.

**Yasmin Qureshi:** I entirely agree with the hon. Lady on this matter.

The inquiry was intended to look at a possible association, not a causal link. That is very important because a different burden of proof is required for a possible association as opposed to a causal link. That was changed, and nobody can tell us who gave the authorisation to do that. The EWG was asked to look at regulatory failures. There are thousands of documents from archives in Berlin and Kew that show that there was a link between the deformities and these drugs. The Committee on Safety of Medicines looked at these documents and decided not to do anything with them. Why was that? When the report came out, the initial draft said that it was impossible to reach a definitive conclusion. However, the final document was changed to say that it could reach that conclusion. When the chair of the inquiry was asked why this happened—by Jason Farrell, by me and by other colleagues in a recent discussion—she said that the Commission on Human Medicines looked at the documents very thoroughly and told the panel that

“we should strengthen the wording and put a greater clarity on it.”

It is unacceptable for the commission to have asked the panel to change its conclusion.

When I raised the report with the Prime Minister recently, one of the reasons she said that there was confidence in it was that Nick Dobrik had said that he endorsed it. However, he has said:

“I was very angry when I was informed that my name was used to endorse the conclusions of this report.”

[Yasmin Qureshi]

Is the Minister aware that the EWG refused to look at the most up-to-date study on Primodos conducted this year by Dr Neil Vergesson? It said that the study had not been peer-reviewed, yet it looked at 44 other non-peer-reviewed studies, some of which had been produced by the manufacturer itself, Schering. Dr Vergesson found that Primodos deformed fish embryos, and if given in high doses actually killed them. Dr Dean apparently carried out a study and wrote to Schering telling it what his findings were. He also informed the Royal College of General Practitioners about this. That study has also been ignored, and there is no record of it at all. We know that it exists only because a letter was found showing that he had discussed this matter and told all the parties concerned what was going on, but again nothing happened.

The man in charge of the Committee on Safety of Medicines—its chief scientist, Dr Inman—also conducted a study and found that there was an adverse reaction. Instead of dealing with the issue, he contacted the manufacturer and told them to

“take measures to avoid medico-legal challenges.”

Documents from Berlin show that he later said that the documents on which he based his investigation were going to be destroyed. He made that admission at a meeting with a Schering scientist in Bermuda. A Dr Greenberg carried out a study that showed a significant twofold increase in risk of malformed babies being born to women who took this drug. Eventually, in 1977, the Committee on Safety of Medicines wrote to doctors saying that the drug should stop being given. It said that “the association is confirmed” between Primodos and deformities. It was “confirmed”, unequivocally—and that was in 1977.

Why does the EWG seem to have disregarded all these studies, not to have bothered to take any interest in what was happening and failed to look at the regulatory failures? It is vital that further scientific research is carried out not only to establish an association, but because the EWG report says that the component parts of Primodos are currently safe to be used. That is very worrying, because it is being used in many contraceptive pills. Studies and independent research should be carried out on this, because we might find that even though the drug is being used, it might be harmful to women, and we could prevent further problems from occurring. I am asking for an independent inquiry into the regulatory failures. We must put the families first.

3.44 pm

**Bill Grant** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) for securing this extremely important debate. Many constituents in Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock, and throughout the UK, will have been disappointed by the recently published outcome of the review by the Commission on Human Medicines expert working group, but I have one constituent in particular who is devastated by it. It was concluded that the scientific evidence did not support a causal association between the use of hormone pregnancy tests such as Primodos in the mid to late part of the last century—roughly from 1953 to the late 1970s—and miscarriages or horrendous birth defects ranging from brain damage and heart abnormalities to transposed internal organs.

Of particular concern to my constituent is the apparent non-availability of her general practitioner records for the relevant period, when she was prescribed—a better word might simply be “given”—Primodos as part of a pregnancy test. It appears that others find themselves in a similar position.

**Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): My constituent, Peggy Gedling, finds herself in precisely that situation. In 1969, when she gave birth to her son Justin, she attended a medical practice in Crawley. Many of the GP notes were handwritten, and they appear to have been lost. Her previous practice in Gloucestershire tried to obtain her medical records and found that she had ceased to exist for 12 years. It is very worrying, is it not?

**Bill Grant**: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention, which corroborates my constituent’s concerns. This may be a common thread throughout the United Kingdom. As I understand it, general practitioners’ records are normally required to be retained for the duration of a patient’s life. In the case that the hon. Lady describes, if it had been possible to recover the GP records, it might have been interesting to establish whether there was a cluster pattern for such cases.

My constituent advises me that in June 1975, only months after she was prescribed or supplied with Primodos in the January, a warning was added to the packaging, stating that the drug should not be given to pregnant women. My constituent perceives that to be a response to a realisation that a risk had been identified, at least by that point. Her child was born in August 1975 with serious birth defects, which required major surgery. That child, in adulthood, still has to contend with the associated medical complications. Credit to both mother and child, however—despite the trauma and hardship that they have endured, they contribute positively to society and champion the care of others.

One has to ask, if Primodos is not linked to birth deformities in children whose mothers took the drug, what is the common denominator for the tragic outcomes of those pregnancies? It has, as I understand it, sadly been mooted that such women should consider genetic tests to identify other potential causes. In other words, the suggestion seems to be that all who took Primodos might coincidentally also have a defective gene—I do not think so—and that that defective gene was supposedly passed to their child and formed the root cause of miscarriage or deformity. I very much doubt that, although I might not be qualified to comment.

My constituent does not consider that she has received justice for herself or—more importantly, in her eyes—justice for her child. She feels let down by the outcome and the process followed by the EWG. She had high hopes for that outcome, but it brings us nowhere nearer to the truth or to justice for those who might have fallen foul of a drug that might not have been fit for purpose when it was prescribed, or simply given, to the patients.

For the families involved, I would welcome a broad-based and—as has been said—independent inquiry to review the evidence, of which there is a great deal. The hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) alluded to the fact that the journey has been long, and many pieces of the jigsaw are missing. Those should be secured to enable the independent inquiry to find the truth.

There might have been a regulatory failure; we need to find out. Outcomes for the people who were subjected to hormone pregnancy testing between 1953 and 1975 have been devastating. The families deserve both truth and justice, and it is the role of parliamentarians relentlessly to pursue the truth about Primodos and other such drugs.

3.49 pm

**Mrs Louise Ellman** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I raise this important issue on behalf of my constituent, Anne Darracot, and other affected constituents, and because it is a national scandal—the tragedy of babies being stillborn or born with severe foetal abnormalities after their mothers were given the hormone Primodos as a pregnancy test between 1953 and 1975. In many cases, Primodos was handed out in the GP surgery.

There has been a double failure: inadequate regulation and the failure of successive Governments to investigate what happened in an open, comprehensive and acceptable way. Hon. Members have highlighted the flaws in the findings of the expert working group set up by the Commission on Human Medicines, which reported in November this year. Those concerns include the unexplained change in the group's terms of reference, from assessing the possible association between Primodos and foetal abnormalities to establishing a much-harder-to-prove causal link. They include the questions raised by the group's selective use of research and the limited evidence that it considered. Nick Dobrik's categorical denial of the Government's claim that he, a trustee of the Thalidomide Trust, has approved the report damages confidence in the process.

The significant changes made between the production of the inquiry's draft report and of its final conclusion undermine trust in the findings. Indeed, the draft conclusion stated that due to scarcity of evidence "it is not possible to reach a definitive conclusion".

By contrast, the final published conclusion was that the evidence did not support "a causal association" between the use of Primodos and birth defects or miscarriages. In short, there is no confidence in the working group's findings.

What is required now? First, we need an admission that the current situation is unacceptable and that the working group's report is inadequate. Above all, there must now be a judge-led public inquiry to consider all the available evidence. That was first called for by the late, lamented Jack Ashley MP as far back as 28 May 1978. The inquiry must secure the confidence of the people affected, involving them from the beginning in setting up its terms of reference and involving them continually as the inquiry progresses. That is the only way the report produced can have the confidence of the people most affected.

A wide range of witnesses should be called under oath. All research—whether conducted here in the UK, in Europe or internationally—should be considered. More research may be required, but that should not unduly delay the findings and conclusions of the inquiry. Regulatory failure should be part of the investigation. All research must be considered and evidence must be collected and assessed from a wide range of sources. There must be no cover-ups. That is the only way forward. The women and families affected by Primodos are still suffering from their loss. They are still grieving and will not give up. They and all of us deserve no less than the truth.

3.53 pm

**Peter Heaton-Jones** (North Devon) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing this debate under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee. This was one of the very first issues brought to me by a constituent following my election as the Member for North Devon two and a half years ago, and I want to raise her case again.

The people affected—the families, children, mothers and babies—should be at the very centre of our thinking. I will give one example. I was contacted by my constituent Diane Surmon from Barnstaple. She gave birth to her daughter Helen Jean Marie Barham on 29 November 1974. Diane wrote to me to say that she was given Primodos on 10 April that year, while she was pregnant—she remembers the date all too clearly. She was given the hormone pregnancy test. She was living in Cwmbran at the time and Helen was eventually born in the Royal Gwent Hospital in Newport. However, the baby was born with a number of conditions: Helen had hydrocephalus—a very rare disease—and suffered a brain haemorrhage at 12 weeks of age. Her seizures then started; she was treated at the Heath Hospital in Cardiff and then at a later date at Great Ormond Street Hospital. Diane has a letter from a consultant neurologist at the time, which states that in his opinion the drug Primodos had caused the difficulties to her baby.

Diane told me that Helen does have a quality of life. She can walk, albeit short distances. She needs a wheelchair for longer distances, or when she goes shopping or goes out with friends for a meal, for instance. She is able to feed herself, but help with her daily needs is required and she will always need 24-hour care because of her seizures.

That is one example of the extraordinary impact this has had on one family and one individual and one mother, but that can be multiplied so many times, and that is why it is absolutely right that my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead and others on both sides of the House—this is not a party political issue—seek to ensure this issue is kept in the spotlight. It is right that it is.

Therefore, there are many others in situations like that of Mrs Surmon. Over the years, there have been many attempts by Governments of all colours to get to the bottom of this. I know the Minister is sincere in trying to do that and to find a way forward that will help us get to the bottom of what has happened. There has also been a whole range of studies over the years. The difficulty is—this is the nub of the point I want to get across—that there is so much contradiction between all those studies; there is no agreement yet. The hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) delivered a good speech and rightly made the point that in the 1970s there was a report that showed, apparently clearly, evidence of a causal link. However, in 2016, the report from the Commission on Human Medicines said that there was no such evidence. Now we have had this report from the expert working group, which has come up with a similar finding. As we have so many contradictions and differences of opinion, how do we get to the bottom of this?

**Yasmin Qureshi**: The report by the Commission on Human Medicines was a result of a letter I wrote to the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency.

[Yasmin Qureshi]

The report was not a study into the drug itself; the commission just looked at documents that were in existence, conducted a review on the basis of those documents and gave an opinion. It was not a study.

**Peter Heaton-Jones:** I thank the hon. Lady for that clarification. Many of these studies have been into the historical evidence and the paperwork, which have been sifted through over and over again—she is right to make that point—but there are still differences of opinion between what was said in the 1970s, in 2016 and in 2017, and that is the difficulty.

I have asked the House of Commons Library for quite a lot of background information, which I was going to try to get into, but in the six minutes allowed to me I cannot do too much. What I will say, however, is that, having read the latest report by the expert working group, it is clear that there is a concern, highlighted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead and others, about the contradiction between what it was asked to do and what it then actually found out. The question is whether there is a causal link or an association. We need to explore that: were the terms of reference of this expert working group followed in the way it carried out its investigation? On that, I absolutely agree: we need to look further into what exactly has been done here.

Further evidence from the expert working group is due to be published in the new year. That will be important.

**Sir Mike Penning:** It is not coming from the expert working group; it is coming from a professor. The expert working group rejected the evidence because it had not been peer-reviewed, but it will be in the next few days.

**Peter Heaton-Jones:** My point is that there is more information to come and I thank my right hon. Friend for that clarification on its source. It is really important that we keep looking for this information and that we gather everything we possibly can to help the people affected.

Many other right hon. and hon. Members wish to speak, so I shall not continue for too long. The Government and previous Administrations have consistently tried to look for answers and I know the Minister is sincere in seeking to do that. To support the Government and the people affected, I would like to work together to find a way forward to find the answers they seek. Let us get together and everyone be experts—the Department of Health, Members on both sides of the House and, crucially, the families—to try to get the answers.

I would like to end by referring back to my constituent Diane Surmon, because those affected must be at the centre of our work. In a further letter to me, she wrote:

“In my heart, I feel positive it was the drug Primodos which caused Helen’s injuries. After I took those tablets I was in and out of hospital. I carried a lot of fluid, which I have since been told is a sign of an abnormal foetus. I had had two normal pregnancies before Helen.”

She ends with these words, which I think are extraordinarily powerful:

“I feel very angry. I feel we were used as guinea pigs.”

For the sake of Diane Surmon and all the others whom we on both sides of the House represent, let us focus on the effect the drug has had on them and their families. Let us all work together. I know the Minister is sincere in wishing to do that. Let us all work together to find the answers they seek, while keeping them and their suffering at the centre of our work at all times.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** I am going to have to drop the time limit to five minutes. If Members keep intervening it will go even lower.

4.2 pm

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing the debate and for their work on this issue over the years. I pay tribute to other hon. Members who have doggedly pursued justice for the victims of Primodos over a long period.

I have come relatively late to this issue, but it is very clear to me that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) said recently at the all-party group, the lesson we have to learn from previous scandals is that any inquiry must have the confidence of the victims. The report of the expert working group has already failed that test.

I am speaking today because constituents of mine have been affected by the tragic events relating to hormone pregnancy tests. They have contacted me to say that they have no confidence in the process or in the conclusions of the report. The Pierce family and the McLellan family have had their lives changed by Primodos. They are convinced that their family’s issues are as a direct result of Primodos use. Louise, the daughter of my constituent Edward, suffered life-changing multiple health issues. They are just one of many thousands of families who need to see justice for the harm caused by this drug. The announcement of the review gave them some hope, but, having been in contact with them in recent weeks, I know they share the disappointment and anger experienced by many following the publication of the report.

There are too many question marks over the process and over the conclusions of the report of the expert working group. The report itself flags up the difficulty of drawing robust conclusions on the analysis of the studies available. It admits that the available evidence was very limited. It then concludes that the body of evidence did not “on balance”—key phrase—support an association between the use of HPTs and congenital anomalies. We need more explanation and more justification of what is meant by the words “on balance” in the light of such limited evidence.

In 1977, the medical regulator wrote that there was an association between the tests and birth defects. We must therefore ask what new study or evidence is available to dispute that conclusion. It strikes me that, without new research that tries to establish a new body of evidence, it is not possible to determine whether Primodos is safe. I agree with the suggestion that the Government create a ring-fenced fund to enable new studies, perhaps using imaging analysis and molecular study to try to get to the truth. Even new studies are unlikely to resolve the

issue definitively—it is likely to come down to a Government judgment on where the responsibility lies—but they may at least give comfort to the victims that the whole process has been carried out thoroughly.

As we have heard, there are questions about the regulatory regime surrounding hormone pregnancy tests—I do not have the time to get into the details—but the biggest question is surely over whether this product should have been allowed on the market at all without proper testing.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese** (Slough) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I commend the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) for bringing forward the motion, and other hon. Members. I particularly commend my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for all her work over the years. I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) will be aware that countries such as Finland, Sweden, Holland and Norway actually banned the use of hormone pregnancy tests between 1970 and 1971. Does he agree that the warning signs were clearly indicated at the time, so action should have been taken then to prevent foetal malformations and all the ensuing heartache?

**Jeff Smith:** My hon. Friend is right and makes an excellent point. We must ask why there was so little regulation for so long, given that it is possible to regulate on a precautionary basis, and whether there is a Government liability under general product law that is meant to protect citizens. Those questions need to be considered in detail.

We heard other questions about the transparency of the report, including that the published report is not the original report that was first presented. A number of inaccuracies were identified and key wording was changed, including the word “definitive”, which was removed. So is this a definitive report? If not, we clearly need a new inquiry. I am running out of time and other people have covered transparency, so I am not going to talk in great detail about it.

There are too many question marks over this issue. In order to regain the trust of the victims, the Government must commit to a judge-led independent public inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005 to look at the issue again. The inquiry must have all the powers needed to bring to light all available evidence relating to the scandal, including the ability to compel witnesses to give oral evidence. The inquiry must be broad enough to look at the scientific and legal issues in the case, including the allegations of liability. Finally, the victims and their families must be involved in the design and implementation of the inquiry following the Hillsborough inquiry’s families first approach.

As we have heard, there are concerns across the House about this matter. It is not a party political issue. Something is not right and we need to get to the truth. We owe it to the victims and to people who may still be taking products related to these drugs. The only way we will get to the truth is with a judge-led inquiry.

4.7 pm

**Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing this debate. I add my weight and support to his call for a statutory inquiry into the scandal of the supply of Primodos as a pregnancy test.

He drew attention to the years that the product was in use. Like him, I am a product of 1957, and it could just as easily have been my mother taking this drug. Hon. Members across the Chamber have mentioned their constituents, and it is contact with one of my constituents that brings me to contribute to today’s debate.

The resident who came to see me and who has contacted me on many occasions is Irene Creed, who lives in Long Lawford in my constituency. I owe Mrs Creed something of an apology because I am afraid that I gave a rather standard reply at our first point of contact. I did not really know or understand enough about the issues that were affecting Mrs Creed. However, she continued to write to me and to draw my attention to the issue. We eventually met in June 2014 and then again at my surgery in August 2015, when she brought along her daughter, Tamara. Tamara was born in February 1973, which means that she is now 44. Like the constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), Mrs Creed was able to tell me the very date on which she was first given Primodos. It was 19 June 1972, when she understood that she was approximately seven to eight weeks pregnant. She gave birth to a daughter with brain damage, which has led to other debilitating conditions such as learning difficulties and epilepsy.

When we met, Mrs Creed asked me to meet Marie Lyon, who runs the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests. I think we should pay tribute to the association for the work that it has done in drawing attention to the issue and for ensuring that the Members who are present today were informed and knew exactly what had happened.

The other key point made by Mrs Creed was that she was given no advice whatsoever about any side-effects of the drug. She drew my attention to the many meetings of the all-party parliamentary group on oral hormone pregnancy tests. I know that the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) has done a tremendous amount of work in bringing together the members of the APPG and adding to the lobbying on this issue.

The most recent contact that I have had about the issue was with Tamara herself, who began her letter of 23 November by telling me that she was a victim of Primodos. She referred to the inadequate nature of the report produced by the expert working group and set out the case made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead for a further look at the issue, which many other Members have also requested. I agree with my right hon. Friend that we badly need to get to the truth, and, like everyone else who is present today, I look forward to whatever positive remarks the Minister may be able to make.

4.11 pm

**Yvonne Fovargue** (Makerfield) (Lab): I pay tribute to Marie Lyon. She is an indefatigable campaigner, the mother of a child damaged by Primodos, and my constituent. Families pinned their hopes on this report, but those families, who had been let down by their doctors and by regulators, now feel let down by the report. They deserved a transparent process, but it was shrouded in secrecy. *The Observer* was bound by the most severe confidentiality order that can be imposed.

I am talking about not just one constituent but nine, in a relatively small geographical area, who have children born with defects. I do not know how many women who

[ Yvonne Fovargue ]

were given Primodos suffered miscarriages or stillbirths, and I think that we should try to obtain those figures. I would also like to know whether if, as is claimed, this was a naturally occurring event, nine babies were born in a similar timescale and with similar defects to women in my area who had not taken Primodos. As we have heard, many women were not given a prescription, but were given a pill, along with the little joke that “We do not have to kill the rabbit now: this is the new way.” We may never know the true figures.

Let me return to the subject of the inquiry. We believed that it had been agreed that the group would look into a possible link, not a causal link—which is not just semantics, because it lowers the burden of proof. That was the first major failing. The second was the existence of conflicts of interest, which was raised by Marie Lyon at the time. Many of the experts had worked for Bayer or Schering. Thirdly, the victims who were invited to give evidence were treated appallingly. Fourthly, there was a selective use of studies: the majority favoured the link. Fifthly, there was the speedy withdrawal of the draft report.

The group had taken two years to reach a conclusion, but all the advice was cancelled very quickly after Marie Lyon gave a presentation. The first draft that she saw had stated that it was not possible to reach a definitive conclusion and contained many inconsistencies. When the final report was published four weeks later, the paragraph containing the phrase had been removed, along with many of the inconsistencies highlighted by Marie Lyon. I have read the report. I am not a scientist, but if ever there was a report that reads as though the conclusion had been written first and the data had been made to fit, this one ticks all the boxes.

I am particularly incensed, on behalf of my constituents, by the offer of genetic testing. A constituent who came to see me has a severely disabled son. She had taken Primodos. She went to the doctor for answers, because she wanted a big family. She said to me that she had a lot of love to give. However, she was told that it was probably “her fault”, so she never had any more children. To have that suggested again in the report is beyond devastating for her.

The report relies on a lot of old studies, and I believe that research funds should now be ring-fenced for new studies. We must also check whether the current regulators are fit for purpose. We cannot allow our children and grandchildren to be put in such a position again. We cannot go back and make things right for these families, but we can give them answers about what went wrong, and how it went wrong, through a fully independent public inquiry. That means full disclosure of all documents through a process managed by the victims—I assure all hon. Members that Marie is quite capable of managing that process.

People need the opportunity to scrutinise written and oral evidence, by compulsion if necessary. The inquiry must be wide ranging and broad, and it must investigate not just a possible association but why the regulatory bodies failed to withdraw the drug, despite being aware of the dangers. Warnings were first given in 1958, but the medical profession was not alerted until 1975, and Primodos was still being prescribed even in 1977.

We must look into allegations of criminal conduct: why was there no intervention by Government bodies, why were the risks hidden from the victims, and what was the role of the manufacturer? Most importantly, families must be front and centre of this inquiry. They must have a role in deciding the panel and the terms of reference, and they must believe that a true light has been shone on what has been a very dark period. There should also be compensation. Nothing can compensate for 40 years of injustice, but financial security would ease some of their worries. This issue will not go away. The families will not go away, and as they age their sense of injustice and the need for answers grow more urgent. I therefore urge the Government to accept this motion and act on it speedily, and to give those families some peace and restore some of their trust in justice.

4.16 pm

**Joan Ryan** (Enfield North) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing this debate. Like many Members, I represent families who strongly believe that their lives were forever changed because of the drug Primodos.

Today I speak on behalf of my constituents Chris Gooch and her daughter Emma Gooch. They have given me permission to share their story about how hard life has been over the past four decades, their criticisms of the expert working group’s report, and why they will continue to fight for justice, and they are with us here today.

In June 1970, Chris Gooch was prescribed Primodos by her GP to find out whether or not she was pregnant. Like any of us, Chris trusted the words of her GP and had no idea that the drug might be unsafe, or that it had been linked to deformities. It was only when Chris’s daughter, Emma, was born seven months later on 28 January 1971, that she was found to have limb deformities in her hands and feet, with both sets of fingers foreshortened and her toes webbed and foreshortened. Her mum, Chris, told me about how Emma has struggled to live with those deformities for her entire life. She said:

“There are many things that Emma would have liked to have done, like playing the piano or guitar, but she has been unable to do so because of limited mobility in her hands. This also came to impact her education and at secondary school she became school-phobic and was physically sick every morning before going to school. Emma has always suffered from severe back problems and has to live in intense pain all the time. She has sought treatment and scans confirmed that she has spinal deterioration, for which she was offered a spinal fusion. This only had a limited chance of success and risked making her condition worse. Emma refused this and is trying to come to terms with her long-term prognosis. She can’t work full time, has to pay for all her medications and has even been refused a blue badge, despite having to use a stick to walk and having no proper fingers or toes. Emma will be 47 next month and can now only manage to work for three days a week and even this she finds extremely draining. She is worried about her ability to keep working in the future, and the implications this has for her financially and socially.”

When I met Emma, she told me:

“Myself and many others have to live with the devastating results of our mothers being given hormone pregnancy tests like Primodos. Whilst the effects on me were much less severe than on some victims, I was born with very specific deformities which I have only ever seen shared by fellow Primodos victims, so in my mind this can be the only possible cause.”

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): The right hon. Lady is speaking very powerfully. Does she agree that there are many who are not as severely affected as her constituent, about whom she speaks so

courageously, but who are similarly affected and nevertheless feel great pain? I speak of people I have the privilege to represent.

**Joan Ryan:** I absolutely agree. Members across the Chamber today have given examples, but there are many victims with different levels of disability, illness and deformity as a result of this drug.

When I asked Chris and Emma what they thought about the expert working group's report and how the inquiry process had been handled over the past three years, their criticisms could not have been clearer. Chris told me:

"I feel angry that they treated us like idiots. We have been treated appallingly. The Expert Working Group produced a report in October and then, following a meeting with our Chair, Marie Lyon, they removed some material and re-issued it a month later. They said it was to make it more readable. They found no causal link, which they weren't even requested to look for. They only gave us a day's notice to organise a visit to hear the report's findings and I am sure that is because they hoped no one would turn up to hear them. Now nearly 50 years on, our children, the ones who are still alive, are still suffering. I am angry that for Emma, and for many other members of the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests, life is a constant struggle and we still haven't really been heard."

Emma herself told me that she

"cannot help but feel angry that for decades we have waited for an independent and unbiased enquiry, but the Expert Working Group's obviously flawed report feels like an attempt to discredit us and instead protect the powerful companies and authorities that were at fault."

Since I was first made aware of the issues surrounding the drug Primodos, I have been reminded of the thalidomide and contaminated blood scandals. I am reminded of the fact that it took decades of tireless campaigning before the truth and natural justice were reached. The inquiry has been accused of failing to consider all the evidence fairly, failing to have the trust and confidence of the victims for whom it was set up, and failing to be transparent and open in its due process. The inquiry failed to consider any evidence regarding systematic regulatory failures of Government bodies at the time. Campaigners have widely dismissed the inquiry as "seriously flawed". I therefore join the cross-party calls for a public inquiry into the use of Primodos and its connection to deformities and other birth defects. I shall end by once again quoting the words of my constituent Emma Gooch, as I believe that her determination will be shared by Members on both sides of the House. She said:

"Sadly it is too late for some, but the victims and parents still deserve justice and we will continue to fight for it."

4.22 pm

**Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab):** I join other hon. Members in thanking the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), but I hope they will forgive me if I say that even more thanks are due to Marie Lyon and the other people who have been campaigning, some for many decades, to get justice and to discover the truth about Primodos.

I have been struck by the consistency of the stories that we have heard today, but there is one detail that I do not think the Minister will be able to help us with—that is not a challenge to him, by the way. We will probably never know how many women were given Primodos, and some of the victims will probably never be in a

position to know whether they were victims of it. I have a constituent who used Primodos for a pregnancy test many years back. She lost her child a month after he was born with a blocked oesophagus and other physical difficulties.

Another of my constituents, Adele Stretch, was born with only one finger on each hand, reduced thumbs and only eight toes. Despite her disabilities, she has tried to live a full life. She is the mother of a healthy child, she works, and she does all those things that we would applaud her for doing. She began to realise that Primodos might have been the cause of her disabilities only when, in a casual conversation with her mother, she was told about the test that her mother had taken all those years ago, before she was born. A little later on, having found no one else with similar disabilities, they linked the disabilities as remarkably similar to those of Primodos victims elsewhere. That is why I say that we may never properly know the number of victims.

Our society—not just the victims—should be able to establish the real truth. That matters, because there is a stench in this case—a stench that vested interests have for 40 years been able to obfuscate and obscure, as they cynically and deliberately prevent the truth from coming out. If the truth does come out, there will of course be consequences. It might be that scientifically provable causality will be difficult to establish over such a period of time—the drug is of course no longer inflicted on women for its original purpose—so it may be difficult to achieve the scientific veracity that would let scientists prove a causal link. That does not mean to say that the statistical consistency of victims relative to the use of the drug is insufficient to give us a genuine belief that there is enough correlation to draw our own conclusion.

That is important, however, because the victims of course want the truth, and they want the scientific and medical communities to accept and own up to the faults. That is important for another reason, because we have to say that this kind of obfuscation can never happen again. We cannot have a medical community and a drug industry that are driven by money—I know why that is the case—and unwilling to let the sun shine into their practices. We cannot have such a regime any more. Primodos matters to the victims, but it matters even more because of what it means.

If we can move the debate forward, have a judge-led inquiry and get some final reports with genuinely believable credibility, that will lead to the demand for compensation, so I understand why the Government might be reluctant. My constituent Adele Stretch says that she is leading a full life at the moment despite her disability, but she is now 51 and says that she can feel the future beginning to impose on her. She would like to believe that as she gets older, when her single fingers will find it even more difficult to carry her shopping, there will be some recognition of that and, where appropriate, some compensation.

4.27 pm

**Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD):** I am here because of my constituent Sue Illsley, who took this drug when she was a teenager. She believes that her daughter has suffered disabilities as a result, and that has obviously affected her whole life. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and the hon. Member for Bolton South East

[*Sir Edward Davey*]

(Yasmin Qureshi), and I hope that the Minister will read their speeches, because they made some powerful points about the evidence, and he needs to ensure that his officials look into that in detail.

I want to use some evidence given to me by Jason Farrell, an investigative news reporter at Sky News who has done a fantastic job over many years to bring this matter to light. I particularly want to refer to documents that he found in the national archives in Berlin, which include minutes of meetings between the company, Schering Chemicals Ltd, its lawyer and a scientific adviser. I will read extracts from the minutes of meetings held on 20 and 21 December 1977 at the Goldsmith Building, Temple, London, where Schering was getting the legal advice of a Mr Clothier, QC. The extracts will show that there has been a cover-up over years, and it has to stop here, today. We have to pass this motion and the Government have to act—no more cover-ups. The minutes state:

“Mr Clothier then went on to the letter written by Dr. Pitchford and Dr. Bye to Dr. Friebel in Germany (6th June 1968) requesting that... it was important that something more must be done. Mr Clothier went into this letter in some detail and suggested that it would be dynamite in the hands of the claimants.”

Another memo from Dr Pitchford to Dr Friebel, dated 22 July 1969, was raised by Mr Clothier. This memo was a summary of events and stated that Schering should abandon the product for use in pregnancy testing. Mr Clothier wished to know what had been done on the Schering side in response. No answer.

Mr Clothier felt, if the case were tried to the end by a judge, the chances were that the company would be found to be in neglect of its duty. Clothier stated that there seemed to be a 5:1 chance that, if there were a malformation in a child and the mother took Primodos while pregnant, it was the fault of the drug.

Page 7 of the memo states that Mr Clothier told Schering

“there were 2 alternatives open to us—one is to establish a voluntary scheme of compensation in which a justifiable claim will be given compensation without proof of liability but simply accepting moral responsibility.”

The other alternative was to take such claims to court.

Dr Detering of Schering said he was

“hesitant in establishing a scheme as the product is marketed world-wide. If we introduce this scheme in one country, we should introduce it in other countries.”

Back in 1977, people were trying to escape their moral responsibilities.

Other prime issues were raised in this minute but, because of the time, I will go on to the other minute, which is the report of a meeting with Professor Tuchmann-Duplessis, a scientist from Paris, on 16 February 1978. The minute is dated the next day and states:

“The meeting...was arranged by Dr. Detering in Berlin in order to determine Professor Tuchmann’s general opinion on the validity and quality of the work that had been carried out on Primodos.”

According to this minute, the first question posed was:

“Did we, as a Company, carry out all the studies that we were supposed to?”

The answer was:

“In Professor Tuchmann’s opinion we should have done much more. He expressed the view that after discovering that a certain dose was embryolethal in rabbits and in rats, we should have certainly carried out teratological studies in primates in 1968.”

This is a scandal. They knew. The lawyers were saying that the company would be liable, and that it would be found guilty in a court and would have to pay.

Why does this continue? We have heard from many hon. Members today about constituents across our country whose lives have been blighted by this. Why continue? The Minister has to stand up to the official briefings he is getting. He has to stand up to the nonsense of continued obfuscation and cover-up. Surely he must stand up and say at the Dispatch Box that he will support the motion, and that the Government will set up a judicial inquiry as soon as possible.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. The Front Benchers have up to eight minutes each.

4.32 pm

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): It is such an honour to sum up this humbling and moving debate. I commend all Members who have contributed, particularly the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), and the Clerks, to whom he rightly paid tribute, who drafted the motion. I also commend the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who has fought tooth and nail for the victims of Primodos, as has Marie Lyon—she is a modern-day hero as far as I am concerned.

Like other Members, this case was one of the first that came to me after I was elected in 2015. My constituent Wilma Ord, who took Primodos in 1970, is in the Public Gallery with her daughter. Kirsteen was born with a range of birth defects, including profound deafness, cerebral palsy, an underactive thyroid that was diagnosed at age 11, and labyrinthitis. Her mobility is getting worse. I will briefly repeat some of their comments.

This is how Wilma describes what her life has been like:

“Our lives have been turned upside down, are we going to see justice for our kids? It is now that we need it, because every day we see the difference in mobility and it is real. These people need to be taken care of and it is the opportunities that have been taken from them since the day they were born”.

I asked Kirsteen if she would like anything passed on, and she said:

“I don’t see why there was a cover up in the first place. They should fix it now.”

We can never say it often enough, but this place is at its best when we are in agreement, and today we have had cross-party agreement. I am sure the Minister is aware of the strength of feeling. It is also at its best when we are representing and speaking up for our constituents, as everyone has done here today.

Another lady, who did not want to be named, contacted me this week to say:

“I was wondering if I can count on your support on Thursday. My daughter died at birth after I took The Primodos drug, she was born without the top of her brain and skull.

This week would have been her birthday, December 13th.”

So her birthday would have been yesterday. That is harrowing, as it is harrowing to hear about the deformities and disabilities that hon. Members have spoken of.

I must draw on some of the comments that really struck me. The hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) talked about our constituents being treated as guinea pigs, and that is, in essence, what they were treated as—human guinea pigs. Let us not forget that this drug was on the market unregulated and untested for five years before any proper research was done on it. The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) spoke about the research and the information that came from Germany and some of the vast number of documents that were not looked at by the expert working group. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) could not be with us today, but she has spoken about her constituent Russell Kelly, who has also been affected and wanted to share his experience. Russell is the youngest of four children, the other three having all been born healthy. His mother was prescribed a similar drug to Primodos and he has been left with significant disabilities, which has been devastating.

Since the release of the report on hormone pregnancy tests produced by the Commission on Human Medicines, our constituents have been further let down. I was there, as I know other Members were, at the press conference—indeed, the hon. Member for Bolton South East and I were walked out of it. Some of the women who took Primodos told me at the launch of the report that they had been told that they should now be happy and take comfort from knowing that it was not taking Primodos that caused their babies to be born with defects or malformations. How offensive and insulting is it to say something like that to victims who have experienced so much trauma? None of these women is happy or comforted, and many were absolutely shocked, particularly at the fact that the expert working group did not want to watch the Sky documentary that we had spoken about. That seems utterly incredible, but the group said it did not want to be prejudiced.

As we have heard, the report, which was produced by the expert working group, was changed between the draft and final stages. Given the process and the amount of public money committed to it, it is shocking that such a situation has been uncovered. I hope the Government will reflect on everything that has been asked on the judge-led inquiry moving forward, and on how a process can fall down and become so bad. We know that Marie Lyon, who was mentioned by the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), was restricted by the most serious and difficult circumstances as a result of the legal document she had to sign. Marie Lyon wanted to help; she wanted to make the process better. She had information that she could have passed on, but she was not able to do that—because of the document she had to sign, she was not able to do the job she wanted to do. I hope the Minister considers that as well.

I was deeply concerned that what was described as a “scientific process” by the expert working group was not just about the science. Many Members have talked about the concern that arose recently when Dr Gebbie, the chair of the expert working group, was asked about the change from the draft report not being able to reach a conclusion to the final report being able to reach one. Her reply was:

“The CHM all commented very fully and said we should make it more conclusive.”

When it was put to her as a follow-up question that those people are not scientists, she said, “Yes they are.” The point is that those people did not sit through the expert working group for all those months going through the information, so how could they possibly have that information to reach that conclusion?

I know we are pressed for time, so I shall conclude by quoting my constituent once again. She says:

“We need help now, not in 5 or 6 years’ time.”

She says that she does not really want a public inquiry; she wants something to compensate for what has happened to her and Kirsteen. She says that she wants her daughter “to have a house where there are no stairs, but no one is prepared to give her it.”

She also says:

“We need to have trust in the people who are governing us—we look back at all these years ago and we look at what is happening now and they are still failing us. They let drugs go out that should never have gone out and they were negligent. The same people are not around now so why can’t someone now just do the right thing and say we were wronged?”

4.39 pm

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), who opened the debate so powerfully, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who has been a strident campaigner on this issue for more than six years and knew all about it before it had even reached my consciousness. She gave an excellent, if rather too short, speech. I thank all other Members for their passionate and thoughtful contributions; because of the time constraints, I hope they will please forgive me for not naming them all. Ultimately, thanks must go, as others have said, to Marie Lyon, the chair of the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests. I am sure that I speak for all of us in the House today when I say that she has the utmost respect and admiration of Members from across the House.

I want to touch on not only the science that was used to come to the conclusions in the review, but what is missing and what should have been considered before any conclusions were drawn. I will then highlight why this is a matter of injustice and why it is important that answers are found, so that we can finally conclude this sad chapter.

The main sticking point of the review’s conclusions is that the expert working group found that the science did not support a causal association between HPTs during pregnancy and adverse outcomes. My focus will be on the science used and the historical documentation that we are aware of, but which seems not to have been considered—we heard about some of it in the excellent speech by the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey). I will not deviate into the important argument about “possible” and “causal”, as that was covered comprehensively by other Members, including the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead.

I must make it clear from the outset that I am no scientist—I am sure that Members are aware of that—and my speech is not a critique of the integrity and expertise of the specialists involved. However, the conclusions arrived at in the report and the conversations I have had with many of those who have been involved in the campaign show a need for us to be critical of what was concluded by the expert working group. That is our duty

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

as Members of Parliament, especially when it comes to what is such an important matter for so many women and their families, and also because a great deal of public funds were invested in the review over the past few years.

In the report's consideration of the scientific detail regarding HPTs, it is argued that there are inconsistencies in the conclusions drawn from the evidence used. Take, for example, the fact that of the 15 studies that looked at heart defects, 11 favoured a link, and of five studies into limb reduction, all found a link, yet those studies were deemed to show "insufficient evidence" of the drug's harm. Even information I requested recently and got just this week from the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency in the lead up to this debate is at odds with the conclusions of the review, including graphs that plot birth defects against the availability of HPTs. Even to my untrained eye, they show a possible link. In one graph on all malformations, it is clear that birth defects increased during the period in which HPTs were on the market, and shortly afterwards. They began to decrease soon after HPTs were taken off the market.

Further, in the briefing I received, the MHRA said that for every 100 babies born in the general population, around two to four are expected to have a birth defect, which means that 14,000 babies a year would be expected to be born with a birth defect. That is just generally. Using those figures, the MHRA concluded that for the more than 1 million women who took HPTs, as many as 19,000 babies would be born with a birth defect, irrespective of any additional risk from HPTs. Yet let us compare Primodos to thalidomide, for instance. More than 30 million thalidomide prescriptions saw 600 children affected in the UK, which is a rate—I have had help with these numbers—of 0.002%. Some 1.2 million Primodos prescriptions were sold and 800 children were affected, which is a rate of 0.06%. That shows a much higher prevalence caused by Primodos compared with thalidomide. It also shows how little meaning a comparison of HPT adverse reactions has against today's prevalence of birth defects in the general population, and it is hardly a defence of disproving a link.

As I have said, I am no scientific professional, but I believe that the red flags that arise when reading what the evidence says and what conclusions were drawn from it are not ones that only an expert in this field would see. This reflects the arguments that were raised last week by Dr Neil Vargesson—that the report does not provide definitive evidence that the drug was safe. As others have said, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that a link cannot be ruled out.

That leads me on to my next point, which is to touch briefly on the historical perspective and cover-up of the evidence. We have got to use that word—it is the only word we can use—as this is something that should have been considered by the expert working group.

One such example was in 1975, when the UK regulator knew of a potential five-to-one risk that the drug could cause deformities, but that evidence was apparently later destroyed. This is a running theme—I do not have time to go into it all—through the chronology of this scandal. We see multiple examples of suppressed information regarding the adverse effects and delayed notification of those effects to medical professionals who administered the drugs.

It is also deeply concerning that this drug came into the market in 1958, with no studies on its effects at all until 1963. Five years passed before it even underwent teratogenic testing. It was still officially in circulation until 1975, but we are aware of cases of its use up until 1978. All the evidence uncovered should have been considered as part of the review. The question is: why was it not?

With any scandal such as this, it is important that those affected have the trust and confidence of any review or inquiry undertaken. In this instance, that has not been the case. The victims feel that the review has muddied the waters even more and that their views have been ignored. I have been told many harrowing stories, many of which we have heard today, and how, time and again, they have been ignored. These women did not ask to be given HPTs. Nor were they ever made aware of the effects that they could have on them or their unborn baby. They were just given them—sometimes out of a supply in a drawer on the doctor's desk. There were no warnings, no explanations, no discussions.

A great injustice has been inflicted on these women. It is up to this House to put pressure on the Government of the day, here and now, in a fully cross-party, non-partisan way, to make things right. It is paramount that a judge-led public inquiry be conducted—one that is independent and can fully examine all the materials and documentation available and insist that all information be made public, including that which has been withheld so far. I hope that this debate helps us to take that one step further to achieving that.

In closing, may I quote the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), the then Minister for Life Sciences? In October 2014, when he instigated this review, he said that the review would

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

Let this debate and the following actions by the Minister ensure that what was promised in 2014 is actually achieved.

4.48 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine):** Let me start by saying that this debate has been carried out with a tone and style that do great credit to this House and to the families who have campaigned so hard for so long. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), and I are becoming known for the non-partisan way in which we approach some of the issues in our portfolio, and long may that continue.

Let me congratulate my right hon. Friend—I also congratulate him on his elevation last week—the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing a further debate on this important issue. I pay tribute to the Members who continue to campaign tirelessly on behalf of those who were given hormone pregnancy tests. I was struck by what the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) said—she mentioned that this was first raised in the House in 1978, when I was four. I hope that we can achieve closure before it is that long again.

Let me be crystal clear from the very start. The Government's utmost priority is and always will be—my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has done more than most—the safety of NHS patients. We have listened

to the concerns of patients and their families. We have certainly listened to parliamentarians on the matter of hormone pregnancy tests over many years, and we will continue to do so over the coming weeks and months.

Time and again during today's debate we have heard that there is a lack of trust and a lack of faith in this process—the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) said this clearly; I thought he made a very good speech—contrary to the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) that the shadow Minister quoted. That troubles me, so let me be clear. We have ruled out no options at this time.

The report of the group published on 15 November represents the culmination of a rigorous piece of scientific work by a group of experts all well respected in their field. It is the most exhaustive investigation of the issue undertaken to date. However, it is clear to me that many Members and the families for whom they speak have concerns about this issue. We are committed to listening to them and acting on them. Although we differ on many points, there are surely a couple of things on which we can agree at the outset. The first is that the safety of mothers and their unborn children has to be paramount. The second is that standards in medicine, science and regulation have changed beyond all recognition in the last 50 years.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) and the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside said that drugs were handed out from the GP's desk drawer, and indeed it says that on page xii of the report. The footnote says:

"Today, there are strict requirements for the supply of free samples of medicines to prescribers, as set out in section 6.12 of the MHRA Blue Guide".

That is why I say that medicine, science and regulation of prescribing have changed hugely in the past 50 years. It is imperative for me that we continue to seek improvement in this area. That is why we have tasked the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency with implementing the recommendations of the expert group. They are quite wide. They are not just nice to haves; they are valuable initiatives that should permanently benefit the millions of women who use medicines in pregnancy.

Several themes came up in the debate. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead mentioned Mr Dobrik. I apologise if Mr Dobrik feels that his name has been used inappropriately; I think that is the right thing to do. He was invited, as an advocate for families facing these issues, and made a strong contribution throughout. Let me be clear as the Minister. We thank him for his contribution. He is a campaigner who rightly has wide respect across our country and the world, and I know that that will continue to be the case.

My right hon. Friend spoke about the name of the inquiry. I am told that the group was reminded from the start that it had been set up not as a statutory inquiry but as an expert group of the Commission on Human Medicines. It was important to be clear on that at the start because formal inquiries have a very different structure and statutory powers. I do not think that there was an inconsistency there, but we can continue that debate. Almost all those who spoke mentioned the terms of reference—"causal" versus "possible". The terms of reference set out the scope of the review, and I do not believe that they changed. They were endorsed by the

CHM in December 2014 a few weeks after the previous debate, and confirmed by the then Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk, in a letter to the all-party group in September 2015. In the same letter, the all-party group was informed:

"it is important to review the scientific evidence to establish whether there is any causal association between use of HPTs and subsequent birth defects in the child."

It is implicit and integral to any scientific assessment of evidence on medicines and associated harms to see whether the medicine is actually responsible for causing the harm rather than simply being associated with it.

The hon. Member for Manchester, Withington and others mentioned changes to the expert group report. I know that many Members are concerned about differences in the draft and final reports, and especially over the removal of the sentence that said:

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

That sentence in the draft report was followed immediately by the group's overall finding

"that the available scientific evidence does not support a causal association between the use of HPTs such as Primodos, during early pregnancy and adverse outcomes."

The CHM quite rightly considered the two sentences together to be misleading, and advised that the report should be revised to better reflect the scientific—I stress, scientific—conclusion of the group, and that is set out on page 100 of the final report.

The hon. Members for Bolton South East, (Yasmin Qureshi), for Manchester, Withington and for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) and others spoke about historic actions. Ministers have always been clear that issues of historic regulatory process were outside the scope of this review because there first needed to be clarity on whether there might be a link between HPTs and birth defects. That point was made by the much-mentioned former Minister for Life Sciences—my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk—in his letter to the all-party group in September 2015, when he said:

"the review will include a chronology of events, but the EWG"—the expert working group—

"will not be asked for its advice on systemic or regulatory failures".

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West and a number of other Members said that that should have been different. As I said to the hon. Member for Bolton South East, I am listening, but the report that I inherited on my desk this summer had that as its guidance. The group was not set up to look at those historic actions. Whether or not it should have is a matter of debate.

The hon. Member for Bolton South East—while we are talking about her—and the hon. Member for Makerfield mentioned the transparency issue and the "gagging order". As I said during the urgent question, I can assure the House that, in being asked to sign a confidentiality undertaking, Mrs Lyon, who is here today—and I pay great tribute to her for her work—was not in any way treated differently from other panel members. This is standard procedure so that discussions can be held freely and openly in the group without external interference or a running commentary in, God forbid, the media. Despite being an observer throughout the review, Mrs Lyon

[Steve Brine]

was invited to speak after every agenda item and asked to give a presentation to the group on the evidence she had provided for the review.

The hon. Member for Bolton South East mentioned the evidence from Dr Dean and the Royal College of General Practitioners that was ignored. The interactions between Dr Dean and the RCGP are fully described in the annexes to the report, and I will come back to that in just a second before I close.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) and the hon. Members for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and for Bolton South East mentioned the interactions with the families. I was clear the last time I was at the Dispatch Box on this subject that the families were not treated with the respect and the dignity that I would expect as the Minister from a body that I am responsible for. I have made that very clear to the members of the group, and I have asked them to report back to me as to how they will do things better next time. I look forward to seeing that, and they know that I mean it when I say that.

I mentioned the transparency issue. Minutes of the meetings and declarations of interest were published last week. I can update the House that annexes to the report, all documents from the national archive and studies conducted by Schering have been published today. The remaining documents, including those from the German archive, will be published sooner than originally agreed, once they have been checked for any personal data that needs to be removed due to confidentiality owed.

I am going to close there and give the sponsor of the debate a chance to close. I thank Members for their contributions. Nothing is off the table, and I am listening.

4.58 pm

**Sir Mike Penning:** I thank everybody for giving up their Thursday in their constituencies to be here. I have been praised extensively for securing the debate, but I would not have been able to do it without the all-party group—we had 57 signatures.

I have constituents whose lives were changed—blighted, completely wrecked—by Primodos, and we have heard of others on both sides of the House today. I heard the Minister say, “Nothing is ruled out. I am willing to listen.” I am really pleased, because he is going to have to listen an awful lot. If this report is still on his desk and being used as a way to go forward, I am afraid that that is an insult to the victims.

This document was described to me in a way that I cannot repeat in the House today, but a better way of describing it is that it was crap. It is fundamentally flawed and does not do what it said on the tin when the Minister asked for it to be done. The Department can talk and move on, and talk and move on, but there has to be an independent public inquiry. If that inquiry decides it needs further evidence, it needs the finance to get that, and it needs to suspend while we find further evidence—and there will be evidence coming forward in the next couple of days.

That is because the victims are the most important people in what we have been discussing today. If we forget that, we forget why we are here and why the NHS has the greatest reputation in the world. Schering is a great brand—we need its drugs—but its reputation has been damaged, and so has the national health—

5 pm

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).*

## South Tyneside Hospital

*Motion made, and Question proposed,* That this House do now adjourn.—(*Mrs Wheeler.*)

5 pm

**Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): I am grateful for having been granted this timely and important Adjournment debate.

I know that this Government, despite all their warm words and platitudes, do not really care for our NHS. The very principle and essence of it simply does not sit well with their ideologically driven privatisation agenda. We should judge this Government's commitment to our NHS by their actions. The shambolic top-down reorganisation that began in 2012 has been followed by increasing competition, increased privatisation, and now the introduction of sustainability and transformation plans and accountable care organisations that are heralding the end of our NHS.

Here is how it works. The Government starve the NHS of the finances it needs and refuse to implement collaborative working structures inside and outside Parliament to come up with a long-term sustainable plan for properly financing our NHS. They then force local areas in England to come up with plans to make £22 billion of efficiency savings to compensate for the Government's own neglectful incompetence. As local areas grapple with these cuts, services are inevitably transferred from one hospital to another. The receiving hospital cannot cope. It buckles under the strain, it closes, and private healthcare takes over.

In South Shields, the sustainability and transformation plans have been brought in under the guise of a path to excellence, and we have been placed in an arbitrarily created boundary footprint area of Northumberland-Tyne and Wear. By 2021, the health and social care system in that footprint area is projected to be £960 million short of the funds it needs to balance its books while maintaining the same levels of care for patients. Make no mistake: these plans are about cuts. They are nothing to do with transforming our NHS for the better. The NHS has been set an impossible task by the Government, and the endgame is to see it in private hands.

Over a year ago, the management teams of South Tyneside NHS Foundation Trust and City Hospitals Sunderland NHS Foundation Trust merged, and work began in earnest on formulating these Government-led plans by local clinical commissioning groups that look after all the health services in our area, as well as the hospital trusts. The plans are scrutinised by a joint scrutiny committee of South Tyneside Council and Sunderland City Council, and the clinical commissioning group is accountable to the respective local authorities' health and wellbeing boards.

The plans are officially supposed to be targeted at improving health and care, but people in Shields and right across England are discovering that they are actually about the biggest-ever programme from any Government to shut down our NHS once and for all. Alongside supposedly improving health and care, the Health Secretary has endorsed plans for cuts of up to £5 billion in our NHS. This is the man who has written about how to achieve full privatisation of the NHS, and who got the Chancellor, in the last Budget, to give £2.6 billion to

help to embed these sustainability and transformation plans—in other words, using Government and taxpayers' money to close down local hospitals.

Despite many people denouncing me and other campaigners for scaremongering, I have remained firm in my view that from the day the two management teams merged, the plan was to downgrade South Tyneside Hospital and move all our services to Sunderland. But I take no pleasure in being right about this. When the first phase of the consultation was launched, we were advised that the clinical teams' preferred option was to move stroke services to Sunderland. Not only does having a preferred option fly in the face of the Gunning principles, but all our suspicions were confirmed when in October last year, without any public consultation, our stroke unit was closed and moved to Sunderland, with the promise that the measure was temporary and a response to staffing challenges. There is currently no option on the table that would allow the unit to come back to South Tyneside.

In relation to maternity services, gynaecological services, and children and young people's urgent and emergency paediatrics, all the options presented lead to a drastic reduction in provision of acute services, in particular, for South Tyneside. Yet in October our A&E, inclusive of paediatrics, was found to be the second best in the country, and South Tyneside is one of the very few hospitals that has achieved the four-hour waiting time target.

I have been consistent in rejecting this consultation. I refuse to accept that a consultation that is predicated on a massive cuts agenda, against a backdrop of additional cuts to social care and other services, will do anything at all to improve the health and care that people in South Tyneside receive; in fact, it will do quite the opposite. I am not alone in that view. The trust and the clinical commissioning group state that the proposals before us were formulated by, and are supported by, clinicians and staff at our hospital, but many of those clinicians and staff have contacted me and provided me with evidence to show that they have, in fact, been actively blocked out of the formulation of these proposals. How on earth can the public be expected to trust a consultation that raises such serious questions about transparency and due process and that has lacked integrity from the outset?

I have been trying to get my local authority to refer the whole shambolic consultation to the Secretary of State, so that the smokescreen can be lifted and matters conducted properly, with due process. So far, to my abject disappointment and that of my constituents, that has not happened. Constituents have also raised with me their concerns about the potential conflicts of interest. Our council leader is a paid non-executive director of the trust and chairs the health and wellbeing board. The chair of the CCG is the vice-chair of the health and wellbeing board and a practising local GP.

On 30 November, a press release was issued, advising that the special care baby unit was closing with immediate effect. The reason given for the closure was staffing issues. That closure, coincidentally, sits neatly with all the proposed options put forward by the CCG and trust. The safety and wellbeing of babies and parents should, of course, always be a priority, but subsequent events indicate that this is yet another development in the managed decline of South Tyneside Hospital. On 3 December,

[Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck]

after the local media had been advised, staff from the maternity unit were invited to a meeting to be told that from 8 am the following morning, the maternity unit would be closing as a result of staffing issues. That happened after the trust had discussed matters with regional groups—not local ones, and not staff.

We have now reached the stage at which no more babies are being born in South Tyneside, but the maternity unit has the full complement of staff present, as it did when it was fully and safely operational. The staff presented the trust with a workable rota system to keep the unit delivering, so there is no reason for the closure to continue. Right now, instead of delivering babies, these trained, professional and dedicated midwives are doing admin and transferring mams to neighbouring hospitals.

I have been advised that expectant mams are having to find, on average, £40 for each round-trip journey to another hospital in the region when they thought they were due to deliver. One woman was sent home after being told she was not in labour by a neighbouring hospital. Once home, and very much in labour, she ended up having a home birth because she simply could not afford another taxi, and ambulance waiting times were too long. The situation is dangerous and completely unsustainable for my constituents, and it takes away a woman's right to choose where she gives birth.

From day one of this process, the trust and clinical commissioning group have given us one version of events, but the evidenced facts from the clinicians and other staff at the hospital tell a different story. The dedicated hard work and professionalism of clinicians and staff is being denigrated, their morale reduced as they work under the veiled threat that if they speak with me they will be risking their jobs.

There remains a multitude of unanswered questions—questions critical to the whole process that have been asked repeatedly. What capacity does Sunderland Royal Hospital have to take the extra patients from South Tyneside? What will happen to the staff at South Tyneside? What transport arrangements will be put in place, bearing in mind that car ownership in the area is among the lowest in the entire country? Does the North East Ambulance Service have the capacity for the increased emergency demand that will be created by the options?

What are the proposals for the next phases of the consultation? This is only the first phase of a consultation that has another two phases to go. We cannot continue with a situation in which those tasked with providing the very best healthcare scenarios for my constituents are acting outwith that remit and not promoting good, safe, equitable healthcare. Choice has been removed from my constituents: their health needs—in fact, their lives—are deemed secondary to those of others in the region. I am asking the Minister to support the taking of some serious steps. NHS England must step in, investigate and, if necessary, remove the clinical commissioning group's powers, and NHS Improvement must take investigative action against the trust.

Things have become very nefarious in Shields; people have misunderstood my representing and relaying of my constituents' views and laying out of the facts as personal attacks. I remind those who have tried to silence me, and who have stated publicly that I am a liar

and tried to bully me into toeing their line, that I put myself forward for public office not to cosy up to others or bow to those in power or vested interests, but to represent the people of Shields no matter how uncomfortable for some that may be. No amount of threats or bullying will stop me from doing the job I was elected and entrusted to do.

I end by paying tribute to all the amazing staff in our hospital and those in South Tyneside who have wholeheartedly joined the fight to save it—especially Roger Nettleship and Gemma Taylor, who have worked tirelessly leading the Save South Tyneside Hospital campaign and are currently crowdfunding to raise money for a potential judicial review. Please, if anyone is listening, donate and help us—this process does not begin and end with our hospital. The Government are coming for our entire NHS.

5.12 pm

**The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne):** I congratulate the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) on securing this debate about the future of South Tyneside Hospital. I pay tribute to the emotion she showed in standing up for her constituents, but I have to say that I was disappointed by the tone she adopted, particularly at the start of her remarks. Frankly, her allegation of conspiracy—trying to paint the issue as some kind of dastardly plot to privatise the health service, for which there is not a shred of evidence—is scaremongering that will undoubtedly alarm residents in her area. That rather undermined the force of her quite proper concern for her constituents, so I am sorry that she chose to characterise her position in that way.

I welcome, however, the hon. Lady's support for the staff at her hospital and join her in congratulating them on their work. Despite significant pressures, South Tyneside NHS Foundation Trust is performing very well for the vast majority of patients under its care. She pointed out the performance in A&E. The trust is one of the few in the country to be performing at and above the four-hour waiting target, but that is not the only area in which it is performing well. It is also one of the few trusts across the country to be meeting all of the eight cancer targets, as well as the referral to treatment waiting time targets—again, that is unusual at present—and all the diagnostic targets. It is therefore one of the best-performing trusts in the country, and I think the hon. Lady and I will be on the same page on that.

The trust and its neighbour, the City Hospitals Sunderland NHS Foundation Trust, recently formed an alliance known as South Tyneside and Sunderland Healthcare Group. That is why the group is looking at a reconfiguration of services across the two trusts to remove unnecessary duplication and improve the sustainability of services to ensure that the local population's healthcare needs are well looked after across the range of activities.

Ultimately, as the hon. Lady knows, any service changes at South Tyneside Hospital will be a matter for local health authorities. All proposed service changes should be based on clear evidence that they will deliver better outcomes for patients. The changes should also meet the four tests for service change: they have support from GP commissioners; they are based on clinical evidence; they demonstrate public and patient engagement; and they consider patient choice. In addition, NHS England

introduced this year a test on the future use of beds that requires commissioners to assure it that any proposed reduction will be sustainable over the longer term and that key risks such as staff levels are addressed.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** The Minister says that both hospitals are working together to create safe healthcare for both populations. However, how does shutting down a maternity unit and a special care baby unit with hardly any notice at all help to create that environment? Surely they are failing the task they have been handed.

**Mr Dunne:** I am coming on to explain precisely why there was an emergency shutdown of that facility because the hon. Lady's characterisation does not quite represent what happened. I will go into that in some detail to try to reassure her and her constituents about the reasons behind this sudden—and, we hope, temporary—closure.

On 30 November, as the hon. Lady pointed out, the delivery of high-risk births at South Tyneside District Hospital was suspended due to staffing pressures. A number of urgent safety protocols were put in place to accommodate a very small number of low-risk deliveries over the weekend of 2 and 3 December. Since 4 December, all maternity services have been temporarily suspended at South Tyneside Hospital on patient safety grounds. The trust did not take this decision on its own initiative. It sought advice from the Northern Neonatal Network and the heads of midwifery services for the north-east of England. Their unanimous clinical view, based on all the evidence available at that time, was that births should be temporarily suspended in the interests of the safety of mothers and babies.

The trust has about 70 hospital-based staff who are directly affected, who have all been asked to report for duty as normal. The staff are working with the trust to contact the 165 women currently affected to ensure that safe alternative arrangements are made. The trust has been in close contact with neighbouring units and has had overwhelming support from NHS partners across the system. Women have been choosing to deliver in Sunderland, Gateshead and Newcastle, with a number of women opting for a home birth.

The trust is working closely to make sure there is an individual plan for each patient and that there is clear communication between the healthcare professionals involved with their care. The trust aims to reopen the special care baby unit for low-risk births when a safe staffing level has been established.

I now want to dwell on the specific staffing challenges that have precipitated this action. South Tyneside NHS Foundation Trust has been contending with the challenge of safely staffing the special care baby unit over many years, so this situation has not just crept up on it. When the Care Quality Commission visited in May 2015 and rated the trust overall as requiring improvement, inspectors raised serious concerns about its special care baby unit staffing arrangements. Since 2015, the trust management has made relentless efforts to mitigate these staffing issues. Regular recruitment has taken place for permanent vacancies in the special care baby unit and paediatric emergency care over the past two years, with the latest round taking place only this month.

Contrary to the hon. Lady's allegations of a long-standing conspiracy to compel the unit to close, I want to give her the facts about that unit as I understand

them. In recent months, chronic staff sickness has reduced the six full-time equivalent specialist neonatal nurse workforce in the special care baby unit to just four full-time equivalent staff. That has resulted in an unsustainable situation, with the remaining nurses working many extra hours each week to ensure safe staffing on the unit. One of the four remaining nurses then became ill, exacerbated by work pressures, and that led to unsustainable staffing levels to keep the unit open. It has not been possible for the trust, however hard it has tried over the past two and a half years, to fill the rota. It has not been possible most recently to use bank and agency staff to do so, given the very specialised skills required by neonatal nurses in the special care baby unit. This decision, although difficult, was driven by very clear clinical advice that put the safety of mothers and babies first and foremost, and also took account of the health and wellbeing of hospital staff, to whom the trust also owes a duty of care.

The hon. Lady referred to the consultation that has taken place in recent months over the path to excellence.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** I thank the Minister for giving way again, but I am really disappointed. I can see that he has the official lines from the trust and the CCG, but did he not listen to what I said? Regional groups made this decision, not local groups. The unit is now at the full staff complement at which it has been historically. In short, there is no staffing problem there right now. Midwives are sitting doing admin work when they could be delivering babies.

**Mr Dunne:** I was referring to the special care baby unit. My understanding is that the staffing levels at the neonatal unit are as I have just described to the hon. Lady. If she has other information, I will happily go back to the trust tomorrow to ask whether it has managed to fill those slots. There is no intention of keeping the maternity unit for normal births suspended for any longer than is necessary.

I will touch on an area that the hon. Lady did not mention specifically, because a similar situation occurred in relation to stroke services in the region. I want to put that into context to help her to understand why the decision was taken.

Since December 2016, any patient requiring acute care for a stroke has been taken to Sunderland. This decision was taken to ensure patient safety because South Tyneside also had a significant staffing challenge in its stroke unit. In fact, it had only one part-time physician, who was single-handedly assessing and treating incoming stroke patients. The stroke unit faced significant pressures in maintaining a sufficiently staffed nursing rota to support that clinician to maintain the patient safety required for stroke patients.

The benefits of centralising high acuity stroke care have been shown in Manchester, London and other parts of the country where reduced mortality and a more efficient use of resources have resulted in better care for patients. Most other parts of the country have either implemented similar changes or have plans to do so. Centralising stroke care into a smaller number of larger units provides the opportunity to ensure that there are specialist nurses and doctors available to manage patients at all times, and to provide access to imaging

[Mr Dunne]

and other investigatory facilities immediately as they are required. I will illustrate what that means to patients, who are at the heart of these changes.

Across the NHS in England, 84% of stroke patients now spend the majority of their hospital stay in a specialist stroke unit, compared with 60% in 2010. This has led to excellent progress in the treatment of stroke over recent years. More than 93% of stroke patients across England now receive a brain scan within 12 hours of their arrival at hospital, with more than 50% screened within one hour. That is a huge improvement since 2010, when 70% of patients waited up to 24 hours for a scan. The concentration of stroke services and specialist units has helped to save lives.

The workforce challenges experienced by South Tyneside Hospital are being proactively addressed in the long term through the path to excellence programme that the hon. Lady mentioned. This is a five-year transformation programme for healthcare services in South Tyneside and Sunderland, and a localised response to the Northumberland, Tyne and Wear and North Durham STP of which she was so critical. The public consultation for the path to excellence programme ran from 5 July to 15 October. The areas of service under consultation were maternity and women's healthcare services, including the special care baby unit; stroke care services; and children and young people's urgent and emergency services. Before the CCGs make their decision, they will consider all the feedback gathered during the consultation from all stakeholders, including the hon. Lady and other hon. Members. The CCGs are also holding a number of public engagement sessions between now and February, in which I strongly encourage her to participate. An extraordinary meeting of the CCG's governing bodies will be held in February 2018, in public, for the two CCGs to make their final decisions.

The hon. Lady mentioned the Save South Tyneside Hospital group. I am aware that the group is active in campaigning against any reconfiguration of healthcare services between the two hospitals. I hope that I have

helped to clarify to her that no decisions will be made on reconfiguration until the responses to the path to excellence consultation have been thoroughly analysed.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** The Minister's analysis of the Save South Tyneside Hospital campaign is incorrect. We want safe, decent healthcare for people in South Tyneside. We are campaigning for equitable, safe healthcare.

**Mr Dunne:** I am sure that that is the objective. It is also the objective of the trust to ensure that sustainable, high-quality services are available to the populations of the areas served by both hospitals.

The South Tyneside NHS Foundation Trust now faces a challenging task in ensuring that the two hospital trusts, through the path to excellence process, remove any unnecessary duplication and improve sustainability. It is important that the trusts work well together, with the local community and with their commissioning groups, to ensure that any plans that they have are communicated clearly to local populations. [Interruption.] The hon. Lady says that that is not happening. It is incumbent on the trusts to engage properly with their local communities. I am sure that they will be watching this debate and taking note of the comments that she and I are making. There should be full public engagement, and as I have identified, that will continue right up until the decision of the CCGs in February.

I conclude by simply saying that it is incumbent on all of us who represent our local communities to get engaged—the hon. Lady is doing this with her campaign group—with the people who are responsible for making decisions. That is the local NHS in her area. [Interruption.] She indicates that she is engaged with her local NHS. I am pleased to hear that, and I ask her to encourage all other MPs to get engaged in a constructive way, to find the best solution for their local residents that will put patient safety at the top of the list.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.29 pm

*House adjourned.*





## Westminster Hall

*Thursday 14 December 2017*

[DAVID HANSON *in the Chair*]

### Asylum Accommodation

1.30 pm

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Twelfth Report of the Home Affairs Committee, Asylum Accommodation, Session 2016-17, HC 637, and the Government Response, HC 551.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson.

The Select Committee on Home Affairs asked for this debate because we believe this is an immensely important issue. Our country has an obligation under the 1951 refugee convention to provide shelter and support to those seeking protection and sanctuary from conflict and persecution. The Committee found serious failings in the provision, quality and management of asylum accommodation across the country. The Government took nine months to respond to our report. Everyone understands that there was an election in that period, but given the time it took the Government to respond, we had hoped for more considered and detailed responses to some of our recommendations. I was certainly disappointed by some of the responses we received.

This is a crucial time for Parliament to consider this issue, because the contracts for asylum accommodation across the country are open for tender—I understand that the closing date is in three days—and we do not want the failings that we have identified in the last few years in the previous contracts and system to be carried forward into the Government's plans for the next 10 years, which is the period the new contracts are due to cover.

Let me start with some of the things we have welcomed, both in the report and in our other work. We particularly welcome the roll-out of the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. I welcome the work done by the former Minister with responsibility for refugees, the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), who set up that programme and worked intensively with local authorities, community organisations and charities across the country to ensure that it had extensive support. It has been heart-warming to hear positive responses from communities and organisations across the country about the way the scheme is working. We argue in our report that lessons should be learned from the scheme's success for the wider support of asylum seekers and refugees.

Let me turn to some of the concerns we identified about that wider provision. Extensive delays in the processing of applications mean that an increasing number of people are being caught in asylum limbo and are unable to work or settle. Cases of people whose claims are not valid are still unresolved, which is unsatisfactory for them, for local communities and for the country. In the meantime, too many people are not in suitable accommodation. We were worried that in 30% of appeals the Government's decision was successfully overturned.

That suggests that in a high proportion of cases the Government simply do not get the decision right in the first place, yet they still challenge outcomes even after cases are appealed. That figure has now increased to 38%.

Since our report was published, the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration has raised real concerns about the quality of decision making and about staffing levels. Staff told the inspectorate that they felt pushed to the limit. Although the Government's recruitment of additional caseworkers is welcome, there are still fewer than there were in 2014, and in a recent evidence session the inspector expressed concerns about recruitment and retention problems in the asylum casework system. Despite the number of new cases having fallen, in 10,552 cases people have been waiting more than six months for a decision. That represents 14,000 people and is the highest that figure has been since 2010. Some 6,952 people have been waiting more than a year for a decision—2,000 more than when we published our report. It appears that the delays in the system have in fact got worse, not better, since we raised our concerns back in February. I hope that the Minister is able to acknowledge the seriousness of those growing delays and set out what action he is taking to address them.

I raised with the Home Secretary the issue of pregnant women being categorised as “non-straightforward” just for being pregnant and, as a result, not being treated under the accelerated processes for getting decisions made as fast as possible. We heard from the inspectorate that some of those pregnant women were consequently trapped for longer in inappropriate asylum accommodation. I received a letter from the Home Secretary today, which I welcome. She says that she is looking further at this issue and that she has asked for those cases to be looked at to ensure that swift progress is made. I welcome that response, and I hope that she is able to make swift progress on those cases. I do not think any of us want pregnant women to be disadvantaged inadvertently as a result of the way their cases are addressed.

Let me move on to accommodation contracts and the procurement system. We raised a series of concerns about contract structure, oversight, funding and dispersal. I note that in the past two years there has been a small increase in the number of local authorities accepting asylum seekers. That is of course welcome, but we are still talking about just 121 out of 453 local authority areas. As I understand it, most of the increase was in the north-west, which already has the most asylum seekers.

I recognise the point that the Minister made in response to our report that some local authorities may be providing extensive support under the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme or to unaccompanied child refugees. Nevertheless, I do not think that gets us around the point that asylum accommodation is still hugely unequally distributed across the country. The Government have not really recognised the seriousness of our point that concentrating asylum accommodation in a small number of the poorest local authorities is really challenging. That undermines consent for the whole system, and it is just unfair on communities—often the most deprived communities—that support is not distributed evenly across the country. All areas should contribute.

I welcome the Government's announcement that there will be additional provision in the new contracts for funding for the south-east, which should not be exempt

[Yvette Cooper]

from doing its bit to provide asylum accommodation. We recognise that accommodation costs are different across the country, but we would like more to be done to ensure that accommodation is properly distributed.

We recommended that local authorities be given more say and more control over where asylum accommodation goes in their areas. We heard from local authorities that did not want to engage with the Government's system because, once they signed up, they would lose all control over where accommodation was provided in their area. There is only a 72-hour window for local authorities to respond, which is just not long enough. Most local authorities know that putting accommodation in an area with no support services, or in a ward that has experienced challenging community problems, may not be appropriate, whereas there may be a much better location with much better services on the other side of the district. As long as local authorities feel that they are vulnerable and do not have a proper say, many of them will say, "We can't take the risk of signing up to the Government's scheme." That is counterproductive, because we want as many local authorities as possible to sign up.

**Sir Edward Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I congratulate the right hon. Lady and her Committee on this excellent report. She makes a powerful point on local authorities. Is it not even more powerful when we consider that local authorities are best placed to engage with the local community in order to provide support for those asylum seekers? There are many local communities, churches and other faith communities who will want to be beside and support those people, who, we should remember, are basically destitute. By not using local authorities in that way, we are preventing that extra community support from being given.

**Yvette Cooper:** That is immensely important, and it shows the stark difference between the national contract-based asylum accommodation scheme and the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, in which local authorities have a central role; local communities and faith groups are involved in providing support and there is extensive planning for the kinds of support services needed. That community support is crucial. Too often in the asylum accommodation system, local communities feel they have had no say, and that asylum accommodation in their area has no links to either the community or local services. It feels distant and detached. That is when difficulties, tensions or misunderstandings can arise.

In the interests of community cohesion and of being able to draw on the very best traditions of our country and of those who want to provide support for people fleeing persecution and seeking asylum—people in desperate need of help—we should give local authorities a much more central role in the process.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee for giving way, and I commend the Committee on its report. Is there not another reason for greater local authority involvement, in that they will know better how to integrate the services for those seeking asylum—for example, by

making sure that women fleeing sexual violence have appropriate access to social work and general practitioner services?

**Yvette Cooper:** That is exactly right. A whole range of additional services might be needed, such as specialist support for those who have fled sexual violence, those who have been through family bereavement and separation, and those who need additional support for children or from education services. A whole range of different kinds of support might be needed, including different sorts of housing support. I was going to come on to this point later, but I will mention it now: there is also a need for proper support once refugee status is granted, to ensure that people can find a future in the local community, settle and get the support they need.

In response to that point, the Government have set up a handover pilot. I welcome that and would like to see the results of the pilot; that would be very welcome. As I understand it, the concern of some of the charities working with asylum seekers and refugees is that it is quite sporadic and it has not worked effectively in some places. I would be interested to know the Minister's assessment of how that work is going, because if we can swiftly help people into work and help them to be embedded in their local community, that is extremely important. It is another good example of what has happened in the SVPRS and, again, something that should be provided more widely. I flag up the concern that the delays in the universal credit scheme, which have been widely discussed in other debates in this House, could make things worse for the settlement of refugees once they have successfully claimed asylum.

Returning to the point about commissioning contracts and providing accommodation, the Committee made a series of recommendations that the Government have not engaged with, including the recommendation that local authorities be given more say and control over where in their area asylum accommodation should go. Alongside that, we should be prepared to oblige local authorities to do their bit. If we give local authorities more flexibility and ability to shape the services, then we should also ensure that there is an obligation on them, so that they cannot just turn their backs and walk away without doing their bit for any of the difficult refugee and asylum schemes in place. Everybody has to do their bit.

We also recommended looking at devolving the commissioning of contracts, rather than having big, national contracts that end up being divorced from local communities, centrally managed and therefore not responsive to local circumstances. For example, we recommended handing commissioning over to the regional strategic migration partnerships that have played a central role in the SVPRS. Why not let them do the commissioning? Why not allow for more flexibility in local areas, so that in some areas the accommodation could be provided by local authorities or charities, rather than it all being done through a small number of national companies—particularly given the challenges we have had over the last period with the way those contracts have worked?

It is disappointing that, instead, the Government have stuck to basically the same contract model, rather than learning from an alternative scheme that is working or looking at alternative ways of doing this. Given the challenges and problems, I am also concerned at the

idea of locking in those contracts for 10 years, seemingly with no review period built in during which we could change, adapt or get out of the contracts. We also argued for local authorities to be given a role in inspecting the contracts, because we identified that some of the problem—and this was the evidence we heard—was that the quality inspection regime is not working effectively enough. Giving local authorities that role, and the resources that must go with it, might make for more effective inspections.

**Sir Edward Davey:** I am sorry to intervene on the right hon. Lady again. She is talking about contracting; does she think it is an interesting idea to open it up to local authorities, perhaps working through strategic migration partnerships, so that they could compete? We might even see several different types of contract with several different types of provider, so we could learn lessons.

**Yvette Cooper:** I do. Giving responsibility for commissioning to the strategic migration partnerships would give us the ability to look at the links between accommodation and broader services, and allow those partnerships to take decisions on a mix of different kinds of accommodation provision within a region. Those could include local authorities bidding to provide accommodation themselves, or working in partnership with other local authorities, charities, housing associations or different kinds of organisations. That allows for wide variety, and for different kinds of bids and proposals to come forward. That was our recommendation in the report.

The remainder of my remarks will be on perhaps the most troubling and distressing part of the evidence we took and of the conclusions we came to in our inquiry. This concerns the quality of the accommodation provided. In our report, we warned that some of the accommodation that we saw or took evidence on was just not fit for human habitation. Committee members visited accommodation, and we certainly saw some that was good quality, but we also saw some that really was not adequate.

In one initial accommodation that I went to, I talked to a woman who had I think three very small children. She and her husband had to take it in turns to come down to the communal room to eat because they could not manage to get all the kids down the stairs. They had been put in an upstairs room that was not appropriate for them, and they basically had not taken the kids out of a small room in weeks. That was clearly not appropriate accommodation for that family, who had been through very difficult experiences.

Our report listed serious failings, such as infestations of bugs or cockroaches, unsafe accommodation and inappropriate sharing of accommodation. Our conclusions were that some of the accommodation is a disgrace, and it is shameful that some very vulnerable people have been placed in such conditions. There are different bits of the Government's response that I disagree with, and we will have disagreements about the policy way forward, but the bit of the Government's response that troubled me most was in response to our conclusion about the serious inadequacy of some of the accommodation. It simply said:

"The Government does not agree with this conclusion".

Had the Government said that they recognised that some of the accommodation falls below acceptable standards, and told us the action they were taking to resolve the problem, we would of course have pressed them on their progress, but we would have welcomed the commitment to action.

I am quite disturbed by what appears to be the Government's failure to recognise that there is a serious problem with the quality of some of the accommodation. We have a responsibility to make sure that the accommodation that people are in is fit for human habitation, but the conditions that some people are stuck in are inhumane. I will give hon. Members an example that I received from the Red Cross since our report and the Government's response came out:

"My furniture was very old. Some had blood on them. I couldn't sleep on the bed; there was blood on the bed, like menstruation blood. They gave me new sheets but no duvet. I couldn't use it. I used my own clothes/wrap as sheets until I got the first money as an asylum seeker and I used this money to get new sheets."

It is really troubling that somebody is being put in accommodation with that kind of quality problem.

**Chris Stephens:** Does the right hon. Lady agree that any accommodation provided to asylum seekers should be from a registered social landlord? Is she aware of instances in my city of Glasgow in which landlord accreditation has been taken away from providers, but Serco has still used them to provide accommodation to asylum seekers?

**Yvette Cooper:** I am not aware of the case the hon. Gentleman refers to, but I will certainly be troubled if the companies involved continue to use providers who have failed to meet basic standards. The quality of accommodation is immensely important, as is a swift response when facilities or services are inadequate. We need to recognise the importance of providing adequate standards of accommodation.

In another example, a mother and baby were forced to stay in the same accommodation, even though the child had been bitten by bed bugs. This is another example:

"I was not allowed to live in the same accommodation as my heavily pregnant wife and was put into a house more than 3 miles away from her when I first arrived. Despite repeatedly asking to be moved to a house together as the situation was affecting her health, we were not given our own house until the baby was 3 months old."

Somebody else said:

"it eventually took 5 months for someone to come out and fix the cooker. The G4S officer said we should 'just eat salad' in the meantime."

Those are examples received from the Red Cross and other refugee charities, and they are very troubling. While I recognise that there will always be a programme of work in order to raise standards, I urge the Minister to recognise that some of the accommodation that asylum seekers are being placed in is really not fit for habitation and needs urgent improvement. More action needs to be taken, because if we do not recognise the problems under the last contract, how can we be sure that the issues will be recognised in the new contracts and the new system, and make sure that the problems do not continue?

[ Yvette Cooper ]

The Committee also made recommendations on making sure that asylum seekers know how to complain if there are problems and are not prevented from complaining about the quality of accommodation by the fear that it will affect their asylum case, and also on sharing rooms. Serco and Clearsprings do not allow the sharing of rooms, but G4S continues to do so. That is a serious problem. Will the Minister reassure us that, as part of any new contracts, that will not happen?

I will finish where I started. The Government have done some really good work in the last few years with the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. I applaud the Government's work in making sure that that quality support continues, and I hope they will be able to extend and continue not only that scheme for those who have fled the conflict in Syria, but a refugee resettlement scheme for people more widely. However, that good work is being undermined by the lack of quality, standards and safeguards, and the lack of an effective commissioning process around the wider asylum and refugee system.

I urge the Minister to respond in more detail to some of the Committee's recommendations, and to set out what action the Home Office is taking in response to those recommendations, and how it is making sure that we do not lock in for the next 10 years the problems that have blighted some accommodation over the last few years. Some of the most vulnerable people in the world are dependent on us for accommodation and support—those who have fled torture, trafficking, rape, violence and persecution, and those who have lost their homes, families, friends and countries. We are already doing more for some groups; we can do better for those who really need our help.

1.55 pm

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I appreciate your calling me so early in the debate. It is with great pleasure that I follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). I congratulate her and her Committee on an excellent piece of work, which highlights a problem that should concern all of us, because in truth it affects all of us. We all, as taxpayers, pay for asylum accommodation, and we should all therefore, as taxpayers, be concerned about its quality.

The Home Affairs Committee has done the Government a great service in highlighting some of the problems with some of the accommodation. My right hon. Friend has been incredibly fair and patient in stating quite clearly that not all the accommodation is bad, and that some is of a different standard. The Committee has been thorough in its recommendations and I urge the Minister to revisit them, because they are very clear and some of them are worthy of again receiving proper scrutiny.

I speak as the Member for the constituency of Bristol West, where we have asylum seeker accommodation, but also as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on refugees. Earlier this year, the APPG published a report, "Refugees Welcome?", which is about refugee integration. I am grateful that the Minister read that report and met me to discuss some of its findings. I am

grateful to him for giving that time, but I want to remind him of some of the findings relating to accommodation.

The Home Affairs Committee referred to the Government's review of

"the 28-day grace period for people granted refugee status and the Department of Work and Pensions' ability to manage applications for support from people transferring out of the asylum system."

I discussed that with the Minister, and he was keen to address it, so I welcome the comment in the Government's response to the report that the Home Office has worked with the Department for Work and Pensions to establish a new process to address that. I will be grateful if the Minister updated us on how that process is progressing, particularly in relation to the issuing of national insurance numbers. That relates to accommodation, because refugees told us during our inquiry that they had difficulties if their 28-day move-on period, when they have to move out of their accommodation, was over before their national insurance numbers had arrived. Refugees spoke to me about having to try to hang around outside the accommodation they had previously lived at in order to wait for the postman to arrive, but not being able to take the post off them because that is not allowed. Those things were problems and continue to be, and they are related to accommodation and having to move out of it.

Our recommendation was that the 28-day move-on period should be extended. I understand why the Minister does not want to do that, but our counter-recommendation is therefore that, if we are going to stick to 28 days, that 28 days has to work. It has to mean that a national insurance number and a biometric residence permit are with that person in their asylum seeker accommodation on the day that they receive refugee status, otherwise we will create further problems for refugees down the line.

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Does the hon. Lady agree that there will be significant problems owing to the roll out of universal credit, given the long waiting times involved in applying for that benefit?

**Thangam Debbonaire:** I completely agree, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point for me, because universal credit is a great concern. Again, I am grateful to the Minister for having allowed me to discuss that with him. I understand that the Government are trying to push the idea that nobody should be out of pocket because they can get an advance, but an advance is a loan. Refugees, by definition, do not usually have other family members to call on who have other funds that they can draw down. They are going to struggle, particularly if they have the compounding problems of a long wait for the first proper payment to come in and a 28-day move-on period, which means they will have often left the accommodation from which they made the application before that has been sorted out. The 28-day period does not marry up with the wait for universal credit, so yes, I agree with the hon. Gentleman.

My experience of some asylum seeker accommodation in my constituency—not all—and the evidence that the Home Affairs Committee has presented makes it hard for me to see why many refugees would feel welcome. The question in the title of our APPG's report, "Refugees Welcome?", would have to be answered: maybe not all

the time. This is a fixable problem. I reiterate that, as taxpayers, we should be concerned when our money is paying for accommodation to protect people who have the legal right to apply for asylum in this country, but that accommodation is costing us a lot of money and is not fit for purpose. I urge the Government to revisit the Committee's recommendations.

We have some fantastic organisations in Bristol West working with refugees, with some great volunteers and paid staff alike who are going the extra mile to help people to integrate and cope with often very difficult and unsatisfactory accommodation that sometimes just about meets the Home Office's key performance indicators but really skirts up against the edges.

On visits that I made following the publication of the Home Affairs Committee report and during the course of the APPG on refugees inquiry, I came across accommodation where there are serious problems. I contacted Clearsprings, which is the provider in my area, to ask if I could make an announced visit. I wanted to give the provider a chance to show me its best stuff. The Clearsprings manager who took me round some of the accommodation—some of which I had seen before—did, to be fair, show me a mixture. Some of it was adequate—I would not call it great, but it was adequate—but some of it was not. I was concerned that action was taken only when an MP intervened and said to the Clearsprings manager, "This draught here, this rotten window frame, this problem here, which has clearly been a problem for the tenant for some time, needs to be fixed." What about all the people in other accommodation—accommodation that we are paying for—that is substandard, unhealthy and unlikely to make refugees feel welcome or in any way integrated, and gives very bad value for money? An MP cannot intervene every step of the way. I am really concerned about that.

I saw some accommodation in which damp or heating were really problematic. In one home where a family was living, the mum had a very serious long-term health condition. Having a damp, underheated or difficult-to-heat home was making life miserable for her and severely impeding her chances of a safe recovery from that serious illness. Her husband was terribly upset by the fact that he felt he was failing to care for his wife at a time of serious illness. To be frank, the house was unheatable due to the fact that it had not been maintained.

I believe that home was unsuitable for long-term use, but the family had been there for a long time because their case had been deemed complex—or non-straightforward, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford said. That particularly worried me because children were living in some of the accommodation that was supposed to be temporary. I applaud the Home Office's determination to stick to the six-month turnaround time, but once we have gone beyond that because a case is complex, people are still living in accommodation that is supposed to be temporary and is anyway substandard. There are real questions as to what we are doing to people who have fled war and conflict and to whom we have a legal obligation.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I apologise that I was not here for the speech by the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, the right hon.

Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). I am trying to juggle my time with another debate in the main Chamber at the moment.

When the Home Affairs Committee looked into this and went to inspect some of the properties, we too noticed some obvious deficiencies. We were assured that the providers have regular inspection programmes that will reveal all those things, which clearly they do not. More needs to be done there, and I am sure the right hon. Lady mentioned that. Also, some tenants are afraid to report problems because they fear they will be penalised for doing so, so they suffer in silence.

**Thangam Debbonaire:** My right hon. Friend did refer to those points, but I would like to reiterate them. That subject particularly worries me, because the Government's response to the Home Affairs Committee's recommendation about property inspections was:

"The Home Office does not agree that property inspection should be handed over to local authorities as it would reduce the accountability of the Home Office and the ability to hold Providers to account."

That would be fine if it was happening, but the evidence that the Committee found, and certainly my subjective and selective experience, was that that is not happening consistently. It may well be happening some of the time—I understand from the Committee's report that there was sometimes evidence of good inspection, or at least good accommodation. However, given that the Committee and I were able to find accommodation that would not pass an inspection, even though I had asked to see the accommodation and therefore was expecting to see Clearsprings' best offering, I question the Home Office's confidence that it is able to hold providers to account. Will the Minister tell us what evidence there is that the Home Office is satisfactorily holding providers to their key performance indicators?

I also came across instances where there were clear problems with damp. When I raised that with the Clearsprings manager, he said that it was due to tenants hanging their clothes to dry on radiators. I asked where they were supposed to dry their clothes; the homes were very difficult to heat anyway, and there was no outdoor space or launderette nearby. I said, "They're a family with children. They've got to dry their clothes somewhere. What's your solution? You can't tell them not to dry their clothes, particularly in winter."

The complexity of the asylum process is compounding these problems, and the fact that an increasing number of cases are being deemed complex adds to the delay. I would like the Minister to address some of the problems with deeming cases complex. In my experience as an MP, the asylum seekers I am supporting through this process ask, "Why is my case deemed complex?" and it is often impossible to work out why. One wonders whether the decision-making process is taking so long that it is easier to deem a case complex than to get it sorted. I urge the Minister to look at what is going on in the nether regions of the process, because it is not good for any of us—the Government, MPs and especially asylum seekers—to have endless delays built into the process, and it is certainly not good for asylum seekers' experience with accommodation.

As I said, the 28-day move-on period pushes asylum seekers into serious difficulties. The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East

[Thangam Debbonaire]

(Stuart C. McDonald) mentioned potential problems with universal credit. I welcome the fact that the Minister has mentioned reviewing that, but I would like him also to commit to a few specific things. Will he, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford said, review the process of asylum for pregnant women in particular? It is an indictment of all of us that we are keeping pregnant women in frankly unsanitary or unsafe conditions. That is not the country we want to be.

This is a time when we should be thinking seriously about what sort of messages we want to give out to the rest of the world about who we are and who we see ourselves as. I am proud to be British. I am proud that we have a tradition of welcoming asylum seekers and refugees, and I want to carry on being proud. At the moment, some of the evidence I see from my work as a Member of Parliament gives me cause to feel ashamed. I am proud, like my right hon. Friend, that we have the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme to draw on. I urge the Minister to address the fact that if we brought the system up to meet the standards of that scheme, we would be doing everybody a favour.

I would like the Minister also to think about the focus on quality and remember that we, as taxpayers, are paying for substandard accommodation. I know I have made that point several times, and it may seem that I am labouring it, but I do so because this should be everybody's problem. All too often, asylum seeker accommodation or problems affecting refugees are seen as a niche, minority issue. Actually, this should be an issue for all of us, because we are taxpayers and because this says an enormous amount about who we are and who we want to be seen as in the mid-21st century.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**David Hanson (in the Chair):** Order. I remind Members that I intend to call the first of the Opposition spokespeople at 2.30 pm at the latest. I call Chris Stephens.

2.8 pm

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Thank you very much, Mr Hanson. It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair. I thank the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), and all Committee members for their excellent report. I want to make a number of points, but first I pay particular tribute to some of the local organisations assisting asylum seekers: the Govan Community Project, the Scottish Refugee Council, the Red Cross and, indeed, the Glasgow SW food bank, which is assisting asylum seekers within the city of Glasgow.

Glasgow was one of the first local authorities to say to the Home Office that it would accept asylum seekers. At that time, the local authority managed those services. I think that we should consider local authorities going back to managing the services. Local authorities knew how to integrate the services; they knew how to integrate social work and the healthcare system, local GP services and the rest. I certainly think that the provision of accommodation for asylum seekers was at its best when the responsibility rested with local authorities.

The work was taken over by Serco, which for a time subcontracted the work to Orchard and Shipman. I have had to be involved in cases in which polythene bags were being used as windows. Constituents were in properties where there was blood on the walls and where wires were clearly not complying with health and safety and were sticking out. We have had instances of women who are making claims, having fled sexual violence, being placed in tenement buildings where the other five properties are inhabited by five single men. We have had instances of shared accommodation in which there has been a clear clash of cultures, which has been very unhelpful, and instances of people being placed in accommodation and then provided with a card whereby they can shop only at Asda, even though the nearest Asda has in some cases been 4 miles away. Those asylum seekers have had to walk to get access to food and so on. Recently, I had a constituency case in which it was clear that the accommodation was unsuitable. There were no carpets, there was inadequate heating, and inadequate bedding was provided.

I want to make a number of points on the report and some of the themes that I touched on in my interventions. Who is providing this accommodation? It is not housing associations, although some housing associations in Glasgow are providing accommodation. It is not the local authority. It is mainly private sector landlords. I would probably go further and say rogue private sector landlords, because recently Glasgow City Council took the decision that when it was awarding landlord accreditation under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2014, those decisions would be taken in front of a panel of elected councillors, and we have found that they have removed the accreditation of landlords, some of whom have been providing housing to asylum seekers.

I want a real commitment today from the Minister that if private sector landlords lose their accreditation under the Housing (Scotland) Act, those landlords will then be removed as providers of asylum seeker services. If they are deemed unsuitable to provide services to anyone as landlords, that should include asylum seekers. There should be no opt-out in relation to that.

There are devolved Administrations who have different housing standards. I would argue that the Scottish housing standard is a lot better than the decent homes standard, which has been referred to, in the asylum seeker contract, so will there be a commitment to meet the Scottish quality housing standard? As you will know, Mr Hanson, representing a constituency in Wales, the Welsh Assembly will have different regulations for housing. I therefore hope that the Minister will commit today to looking at the housing regulations and laws across the UK and under devolved Administrations.

Another bugbear of mine is that when I, as a Member of Parliament, ask a question of any provider of services, I am told, "I can't provide you with that information under data protection." It pains me to say that Serco did that to my office recently when I raised the complaint about housing to which I have referred. I wrote to the Secretary of State on 22 November, but have not yet had a response. I hope that the Minister is listening carefully, because I want to know specifically—I also want a guarantee in this regard—why the Home Office is supporting Serco's view that MPs' offices need the permission of the person making the complaint.

Data protection law is clear when it comes to Members of Parliament. We are not required to obtain that, as I hope the Minister will confirm, because we all as Members of Parliament represent every single constituent, no matter where they come from or how they voted. We are here to represent everyone who lives in our constituency, and I will always do that to the best of my ability. It pains me to see Serco trying to frustrate that process. I will continue to represent constituents who are here seeking asylum from other parts of the world. I regard it as an honour to do so.

I want to make a couple of comments about the announcements about the new contract before I conclude. Will the Minister tell us how many welfare officers there will be? There is now a commitment to fund additional welfare officers. It would be useful if we could get a figure for that. I say that as a member of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, where we have asked Atos and Capita how many qualified doctors there are in those services. It was incredible to find out that there were two qualified doctors in Atos and two in Capita. That perhaps says a lot about our assessment system. It would be useful if we could get a number. It would also be useful if we could get a number for the welfare officers who will be placed in Glasgow, because there is a real issue there with some of the providers. In particular, when Orchard and Shipman had the contract, it was using the police to help to evict asylum seekers. That, I would suggest, was inappropriate, given that a man in uniform means something different to someone who has just arrived in the country and is fleeing persecution from what it means to the rest of us.

I welcome the fact that there will be further dispersal. I have continued to raise that issue in various debates in relation to asylum seeker support services. I hope that the Minister can confirm that he will ensure that funding for local authorities is inadequate. Can he also respond to the letter that has appeared in the press over the past couple of days from 35 organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers? Can the Minister make a commitment that the contract will be independently reviewed within three years of its operation, that there will be independent oversight and accountability to local authorities and that services will be fairly and fully financially resourced across the UK?

It has been a pleasure to speak in this debate and I look forward to the Minister's response.

2.17 pm

**Sir Edward Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Again, I welcome the report. I will start my brief remarks by talking about the Government's overall approach to asylum seekers and refugees. I want to ask the Minister whether he will say on the record that it is a different approach, a different philosophy, from that for dealing with illegal immigrants. The Government have developed what they call the "hostile environment" approach to illegal immigrants. We can debate the wrongs and rights and the shape of that, but the hostile environment policy would clearly be wrong if applied to asylum seekers and refugees. Our country should be adopting an approach of welcome and caring. I invite the Minister to say that that is the Government's policy and approach. I am sure it is, but it would be very helpful to have it on the record that the approach is very different from the hostile environment approach seen elsewhere in the immigration system.

That is important as we approach the issues raised by this excellent report. There has been some discussion about how we organise asylum accommodation in the future. The report goes very much in the right direction, away from a centralised, private contracting approach to a different model. In many ways, the report could have gone even further, but its stress on involving local authorities is absolutely right, and the idea of strategic migration partnerships at the heart of the system is vital. Those partnerships are beginning to bear fruit. They were a good policy innovation, but they need to be developed further, because they will solve many of the Government's problems, as well as making the experience of asylum seekers and refugees far more acceptable and improving quality.

I think there is a huge appetite in local authorities and local communities to do more and be involved, but at the moment they are excluded. That is not sensible policy, is it? If there are people out there who want to get involved and play an active, positive role, we should try to facilitate that. The current contracting model militates against that—it excludes. I do not think it increases accountability, far from it, it is the reverse. Accountability is not direct through the Home Office, but to the people and the communities. If they are more involved it will be a much better system.

We all know that civil servants in Whitehall like to have one organisation to deal with. They do not like lots of organisations, as that is all too time-consuming and complicated. I am sorry, but they are going to have to get used to dealing with more than one organisation. Given that we have these 12 strategic migration partnerships, at least they have a model that means they do not have to deal with every single local authority in the country.

I want to stress the point about involving people in civic society. I recently visited Lancaster where I met a wonderful lady called Mo Kelly from the local Quaker movement. She was looking at how refugees were welcomed in her city. She found that there was no real provision of accommodation or services, because the local authority had not thought that it should volunteer. Given that the Government are seeking more local authorities to step up to the plate, her experience, and what she did with others, is quite telling. They went out and petitioned in the streets. They asked the people of Lancaster, "Would you like to see Lancaster as a city, and our overall community, welcome asylum seekers and refugees from Syria and elsewhere?" Although, of course, a few people did not want to sign the petition—you will not be surprised by that, Mr Hanson—the vast majority of people did. The people in Lancaster—I do not represent it—said "Yes, the local authority and our community should be moving forward and offering to the Government that we should be part of it." That is the point I am trying to make: if we give that opportunity to people out there, they will be far more welcoming than, say, the *Daily Mail*.

There is a big point about how we change the nature of the discussion, the debate, about foreigners in our country. I am really worried, not just because of Brexit, but because of other things we see, that we are seen as an uncaring, unfriendly and unwelcoming country, which is completely against British traditions. If we reorganise many aspects of policy, and this is a good one to start with, we can begin to change that.

[*Sir Edward Davey*]

That brings me to my final two points. I know this point is not directly within the remit of this report, but it links to it, and the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) mentioned it. The point is the right of these particular asylum seekers awaiting decisions to be able to engage in work and voluntary work in the community. My experience of asylum seekers, and I deal with quite a lot in my surgery, is that they want to be involved, to give and to contribute, and when they are stopped from doing that, they are frustrated. Guess what? It does not help their health, their relationship with other people in the community, or the taxpayer—it does not help anybody. Why do we put barriers in the way, particularly of this group? People say different things about illegal immigrants or whatever, but we should surely be allowing this group to engage in activity, whether it is paid work or voluntary.

**Chris Stephens:** I agree wholeheartedly with the right hon. Gentleman. In my constituency, asylum seekers have approached me who have waited years for a decision. They are qualified in health and I am sure they could make a contribution to our national health service by working. That would not only help their mental health, but help them to be part of that community. At the moment they feel that people in other areas of the community who are also poor look at them as if they are getting something special, but they are not. Does he agree that the right to work should be looked at as a matter of urgency?

**Sir Edward Davey:** I do. I can give an example from my own constituency from a few years ago of a gentleman from Kosovo who, with his wife, had suffered terrible trauma in that country during the troubles. It took me three years to get him the right to work. When he got it he went off very happy. He came back the next week in tears, because he had applied to work as a bus driver and the bus company wanted him to be there for 12 months to justify the training. I had to ring up the bus company and say, “I will personally guarantee your training costs, just give him a job!” He got a job. He was one of their best bus drivers; he took all the overtime, and helped old ladies on and off with their shopping. He then set up a business and now employs other people. He pays more tax than I do. His wife, having had huge mental health problems, is now working in our NHS. If we engage with people as human beings—guess what—they want to give back and act as human beings, and be part of our society. We have to do everything to enable human beings to be human.

**Thangam Debonnaire:** The right hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point, particularly about mental health. Does he agree with me that one thing that asylum accommodation needs to do better is ensure that people who have come from traumatic experiences and are possibly further traumatised by the conditions in which they find themselves have access to good quality, appropriate mental health support?

**Sir Edward Davey:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We have been talking about mental health for all people

in this country, but the people who have been traumatised and tortured, escaping violence and persecution, suffer the most.

I will end on one further point, which is not about asylum seekers, but about failed asylum seekers, specifically those failed asylum seekers whom the Home Office rightly does not want to send back to their country, because their country is benighted. It is a very odd class of people, but they exist in quite large numbers. I had a lot of cases of people from Zimbabwe in this situation in years gone past. They did not meet the Home Office tests as an asylum seeker, but we were not sending them back, because of our concerns about what Mugabe and ZANU-PF would do to them. Those people were in limbo. They had no support, no right to work, but they existed as human beings. We need to think about that group of people, because they are the most destitute and vulnerable people living in our country today. I do not know whether they can be included in a new approach to asylum accommodation, but I think they should be considered as the Government review this area. I thank the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford and her Committee for this report, and I hope the Government respond positively to it.

2.27 pm

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Hanson; you have evidently had a busy week. I welcome the opportunity to debate the Home Affairs Committee report, “Asylum accommodation”. I was pleased to have been involved in that inquiry. I thank my colleagues and the Committee Chair for all their work on that project, and for securing this debate.

In this debate I speak as the Scottish National party spokesperson, rather than as a member of the Committee; happily, from both perspectives, I fully endorse the Committee’s report and recommendations. Indeed, I pretty much endorse everything that every right hon. and hon. Member has said. Their critiques of the system have been knowledgeable, and there is absolutely no point in me repeating those powerful and damning criticisms.

Instead, let me address what needs to be done to resolve the problems that have been highlighted. Implementing the recommendations in our report would obviously be a significant start, but ultimately we need a radical rethink of how we approach asylum accommodation to address two overarching concerns.

First and foremost, we need to recognise that we have a system that demands that accommodation fit the budget, rather than ensuring that accommodation fits the asylum seeker. Secondly, the system drastically fails to address much more than provision of a roof and four walls—and even that, as we have heard, is often not up to scratch. There is so little in the system that takes into account broader issues of community cohesion, integration, or health and welfare concerns. In some instances, those other concerns are neglected absolutely; in others, local authorities and health boards have to pick up the pieces, and indeed the tab. “Savings”, as they are called under the COMPASS—commercial and operational managers procuring asylum support services—contracts, are almost certainly just part of a cost-shunting exercise.

As other right hon. and hon. Members have said, if the Minister really wants to make savings, he could consider letting those asylum seekers who have been waiting more than three months for a decision take up employment, pay for their own accommodation and pay tax. That would be good for asylum seekers, the communities in which they live, and the taxpayer.

As right hon. and hon. Members have suggested, there is a strong case for providing local authorities, perhaps in combination with other local service providers, with overarching responsibility and, crucially, proper funding for providing asylum accommodation in their locality. They are best placed to know in which areas accommodation would be appropriate, to link it with other necessary services, and to ensure accountability for standards. Of course, that would include the continued use of private accommodation. For all I know, it could continue to include the use of private contractors to assist in sourcing accommodation. Whereas private contractors now call the tune, that would place local authorities in control, but funding would have to match the cost of appropriate asylum accommodation, rather than accommodation matching a cut-price budget.

Glasgow City Council has a long track record of housing asylum seekers, under both the previous Labour administration and the new Scottish National party city government, which I am delighted to learn is determined to continue that tradition. In fact, that new SNP administration has intimated an interest in bidding for the new asylum accommodation contract in Scotland, but as right hon. and hon. Members have said, the odds are stacked against it. Most obviously, the contracts are divided up into huge chunks—this one is Scotland-wide—making it far from easy for a local authority, or even a combination of local authorities, to bid. A key concern is that the funding involved will not allow local authorities to deliver to the standards that they seek.

In fact, the new proposals seem so little different from the current contracts that they are more like COMPASS 1.1 than COMPASS mark 2. The system is set up in such a way that the current providers are absolutely odds-on favourites to win. It would be wise to pause and reflect on who we are talking about here, because along with the Home Office, those providers have to share the responsibility for the mess of the current contracts. One of them is also responsible for the scandal in the Medway secure training centre and the shocking scenes recorded at Brook House detention centre. Another provider was previously banned from bidding for Government contracts after involvement in an overcharging scandal. Will the Minister therefore meet senior representatives of Glasgow City Council when he is next in Scotland—if I understand correctly, that will be very soon—to discuss how such a public sector bid can be facilitated, so that we can at least ensure a level playing field?

I want to address what I understand to be the announcement of new move-on support to be provided to local authorities in 20 dispersal areas in England. Don't get me wrong: any sort of support for local authorities that are taking a disproportionate share of asylum seekers is absolutely positive and very welcome, but a number of concerns have arisen. This comes just four days before the deadline for intimating interest in the contracts. For a start, that suggests that the Home Office has not for a moment contemplated

that local authorities might want to bid for the new contracts. Otherwise, why would such a material consideration not have been made public many months ago?

Furthermore—perhaps the Minister can clarify this—I understand that most of the funding comes from an underspend at the Department for Communities and Local Government, and that it is essentially one year of funding, with local authorities expected to fund year two. As this is an England-only scheme, it will not be open to significant asylum dispersal areas such as Glasgow, Cardiff, Swansea, Newport and Belfast. Cumulatively, those five councils alone account for more than 6,000 asylum seekers.

Will the Minister confirm what discussions he has had with the devolved Administrations about that issue, and whether there will be Barnett consequential? I assume that there must be, because if there are not, it signifies that the Home Office does not see this as really being about the reserved issue of asylum. Will he also confirm whether the money comes with any strings attached, such as obligations to share information with the Home Office? Although I welcome the additional funding, it does not yet seem to represent a joined-up, holistic approach to the challenge that local authorities face in housing asylum seekers.

I am a realistic person; I know that the Home Office has a lot on its plate, and is struggling to cope with what it does at the moment, never mind the prospect of Brexit, so let me focus finally on two changes that I hope it will consider, even in these difficult circumstances. First, as other hon. Members said, it would be totally unacceptable to sign up to 10-year contracts that bind our hands even if the mess continues, so there must be some sort of review or break clause after three or five years. Secondly, local authorities must be given genuine power, and resources to play a far more significant role in how asylum seekers are housed. Those two small but significant asks are crucial for asylum seekers, local authorities and their communities, and I very much hope that the Government will listen.

2.34 pm

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. Our asylum accommodation system is not fit for purpose. Those who come to the UK for protection are housed in appalling and at times unsafe conditions.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) on securing the debate. She does an excellent job as the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee. Today, she has clearly and forensically exposed the Government's failures to implement the Committee's recommendations on asylum accommodation, and I, too, agree with most of the contributions we have heard from hon. Members.

I will take a slightly wider view this afternoon. The issue of asylum accommodation exposes three underlying issues in the Home Office that run through everything it does: first, the inability to deal with its workload and process cases efficiently and fairly; secondly, the lack of transparency and accountability; and thirdly, the pursuit of cost savings above what is best for communities. There is an urgent need to change our asylum accommodation system. We have that opportunity, as

[Afzal Khan]

the current contracts are coming to an end, but so far the Home Office has not been listening. Now is their chance.

The Committee highlighted in its report that demand on the asylum system has increased and that the Home Office has not been able to keep up. The backlog is significant. The chief inspector of borders and immigration said of his recent report:

“Given the life-changing nature of asylum decisions, the Home Office’s performance needs to improve.”

When the Home Office takes too long to decide a claim, real people suffer. When it makes inaccurate decisions, people suffer.

Research by Refugee Action found that on average, people spend 37 days in initial accommodation, waiting for their claim to be assessed, despite the fact that the Government have recognised that such accommodation is not suitable for long-term stays. The temporary nature of initial accommodation prevents people from registering with GPs, placing their children in school or appointing a legal representative to progress their asylum claim. Will the Minister regularly publish data on the length of time people spend in initial accommodation? Do the Government even collect that data?

I am deeply concerned about the extent to which the Home Office evades transparency and accountability. Contracts to provide asylum accommodation have been granted to private companies and look like they will be again. As complex services are outsourced, they evade scrutiny. The Home Affairs Committee report found that the

“current compliance regime is not fit for purpose.”

Will the Minister assure us today that he will provide an independent oversight and accountability role for local authorities, as the Committee recommended?

Asylum accommodation deals with some very vulnerable people. The Committee’s report highlighted deeply concerning reports of unannounced visits. One person came home to find a housing officer going through their phone. The report found victims of trafficking being re-traumatised by officers entering their property with keys, without waiting to be let in, as well as threats of repercussions if people complained, and rude and intimidating behaviour.

I seriously question why the Home Office has granted contracts to companies that have very dubious records in other contracts they hold. Only recently, staff of the security firm G4S were found to be abusing detainees at Brook House. The conduct of the staff was disgraceful, but so was the lack of Home Office oversight. What assurance will the Minister give that companies with such terrible records will not continue to be granted asylum accommodation contracts? Will he confirm that when we find appalling practice, we can terminate the contract? Will the Minister agree that councils are much better placed to manage the service? They already manage integration and other public services that asylum seekers would be accessing.

The new contracts are being advertised for 10 years, with no break clause. From a purely practical point of view, that is wrong. Asylum is a volatile and unpredictable area. We need proper accountability and the ability to change contracts that are not working. Will the Minister

commit to a review of the new contracts within three years of operation to check whether they are performing well, need reform, or need to be halted?

The Home Office’s aim was to save £140 million through the COMPASS contracts. It seems unlikely that they will achieve those savings. The dispersal system has not worked. Instead, asylum seekers are clustering in some of the most deprived areas of the country, which are already at the sharp end of cuts to local government and are now being asked to absorb the significant extra costs associated with housing and integrating high numbers of asylum seekers and refugees.

The report highlights some success stories. The vulnerable persons resettlement scheme has involved local authorities in designing the process to offer holistic support to refugees and facilitated integration. Will the Minister re-examine the dispersal policy and roll out the resettlement scheme’s approach to all asylum seekers in the UK? Does he agree that privatising that service provided this Government with yet another reason to cut funds from already stretched council budgets? Councils are not being given the opportunity to use such funding to invest in the local area for the benefit of all; instead, it is being used to provide substandard housing to make a profit.

Standards in asylum accommodation are shocking. Nobody should live in a vermin-infested house, or in fear of officers who could arrive at any time. The Home Office’s approach to the issue highlights underlying trends: an inability to deal with its caseload, a lack of transparency and accountability and the pursuit of cost savings above what is best for communities. I encourage the Minister to re-examine that approach and accept the Committee’s recommendations.

2.41 pm

**The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis):** It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson.

Many specific points have been made and questions raised during the course of this debate. I will do my best to cover them, but I will also make a point of going back through the debate, and if there are any points that I do not cover in the next few minutes, I will write to the Chair of the Select Committee to cover them. Although we have quite a lot of time, I want to leave time for the right hon. Lady to respond.

Before responding more generally, I will say that the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) seems to have a better grasp of my diary than I do. I do not doubt that I will be in Scotland shortly. I am not sure whether I will be in Glasgow, but I am happy to meet or talk in Glasgow or in London, whichever works.

Many speakers this afternoon have outlined the ethos and the moral position. The Government agree on the overarching principle of how we look after, support, work with and integrate people who gain asylum here. Although we might disagree sometimes on the details, I would like to think that we agree across the House on the principle.

I urge slightly more caution in the comments made by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey). It is dangerous and wholly inappropriate in a debate such as this to confuse asylum

with detention for returning people. They are different things, and bringing them together in the way that the Opposition spokesman did is wrong and does a disservice to the position that we take as a country. We try to be clear about how we want to deal with asylum seekers, and I will come to that.

The opening and closing remarks made by the hon. Gentleman on the state of accommodation in asylum were also somewhat misleading. Hon. Members from his own party have said that much of the accommodation is very good. I will come to that point. I do not deny that any property that is not up to the right standard, whether it is social housing or accommodation for asylum seekers, is not acceptable. However, to cast it in the way that he did is simply wrong. Having visited Barry House recently, I disagree with him categorically.

Similarly, I understand the point that the right hon. Gentleman was trying to make about what I always refer to as the compliant environment. Again, it is not helpful to have that in the same conversation, because it does not apply to someone who is gaining asylum. He is right about that. Somebody who is gaining asylum will hopefully play a hugely important part not just in our economy, but in our communities and our society. Much as he described, when I have travelled around the country meeting people who have been resettled, whether they are refugees or people who have gained asylum, I have seen that they play an important part in their local community and are valued by the community. He made a good point about that. I am happy to confirm that the compliant environment is a different thing. It is about people who are here illegally, which is different. Personally, I try to keep them in different conversations, because asylum is different from being here illegally.

**Afzal Khan:** To ensure that things are clear, I am not saying that all accommodation is poor.

**Brandon Lewis:** That is what you said.

**Afzal Khan:** Well, we can check that again. Some of it is appalling. The key point on which I wanted clarification is whether the Minister, in saying asylum and detention are being mixed up, is saying that asylum seekers are never detained.

**Brandon Lewis:** I am saying that confusing the completely unacceptable and abhorrent scenes that we saw in the “Panorama” programme on Brook House with somewhere like Barry House and the work done by organisations around the country on asylum accommodation is simply wrong. It is a mistake to go that way. It gives the wrong impression and confuses two very different things.

Ultimately, the United Kingdom has a proud history of providing an asylum system that should look to protect and respect the fundamental rights of individuals seeking refuge from persecution. I have always been clear that I personally and we as a Government are committed to continuing to ensure that destitute asylum seekers are accommodated in safe, secure and suitable accommodation. They should be treated with dignity while their claims are considered.

Since the current system for asylum accommodation contracts began in 2012, there have been changes. It is important to be aware that the contracts for the provision of housing for asylum seekers demand high standards of accommodation—in many areas, higher than in the

social housing sector. I should also be clear that a third of all properties are inspected every year—more than in social housing—and where it is required, appropriate and requested, that is done in conjunction with local authorities, to involve them in the process. It is a requirement that every property be inspected every month by the accommodation provider. We encourage service users to report defects to their provider as they arise.

The contracts also contain strict time limits within which repairs must be made, and we in the Home Office have an inspection monitoring regime to ensure that those time scales are met. The vast majority of accommodation provided has been maintained at a good standard, but as with all housing, property defects and issues can and do occur. Where they do, our providers are required to rectify them. If any hon. Members have examples of where that has not been done, I want to know about them so that we can chase them through the system.

**Stuart C. McDonald:** Does the Minister understand that despite this apparently significant sanctions regime, the fact that so many problems still seem to arise repeatedly and routinely across the country has utterly undermined faith in the inspection regime? Is that not all the more reason to hand the inspection role to an independent organisation or to local authorities?

**Brandon Lewis:** I was just going to say that since the Committee published its report almost a year ago and started its inquiry two years ago, a number of improvements have been made to the contracts and services provided. We must be cautious about accepting some of the things that we read and the stories that we hear. That is why, if somebody raises an issue, I always want to look into it to get the detail. For example, if there is a complaint about accommodation, I will want to chase it further, and I encourage Members to give me details.

We need to be cautious about some of the examples. An hon. Member mentioned a case involving blood on the walls. Members should be aware that we have investigated that allegation, which has been repeated a few times. When questioned about it, the service user who was living there confirmed that the marks on the wall turned out to be not blood at all, but spilt fruit juice. We need to ensure that we are clear that the issues are issues; if they are, we should deal with them.

My right hon. Friend and predecessor informed Parliament last year of a number of changes made to the contracts already in place, including the provision of additional funding to increase the number of housing officers. Members have asked about asylum case working and welfare. We are increasing the number of asylum caseworkers. In particular, we are focusing on non-straightforward cases to reduce the number of people awaiting a decision. The Chair of the Committee referred to the letter that she received from the Home Secretary outlining the work that we will be doing and delivering on, particularly relating to pregnant women. As the letter outlines, there are some complications, but that highlights why we should not have a blanket approach; we should look at every person’s individual needs. We are looking at changes such as additional funding for increasing the number of housing officers, providing more funding to allow providers to procure properties for the increased number of service users, and exploring

[*Brandon Lewis*]

different commercial models to encourage providers to procure additional accommodation. Those changes build on feedback from stakeholders, including people who provided the evidence found in the Committee's excellent report.

As well as those contractual changes, the Home Office has continued to inspect properties to ensure that the accommodation is of the right standard. Interaction with service users has increased by asking questions about their treatment and by ensuring that they are aware of their rights and of how to raise any concerns that they might have. We will continue to meet non-governmental organisations to discuss housing issues formally at an advisory board that we run, and informally by providing avenues for them to raise issues with senior officials.

**Chris Stephens:** Can the Minister assure us that the providers of housing services to asylum seekers are accredited properly and are registered social landlords? Will the contractor or the Home Office keep a register of social landlords, so that if anyone loses their accreditation, they will no longer be allowed to provide housing services to asylum seekers?

**Brandon Lewis:** I am happy to liaise with the hon. Gentleman further on that, but I encourage him to look at the changes that we made in the Housing and Planning Act 2016, which I am closely aware of after taking it through Parliament. We made a lot of changes in terms of requirements for housing providers, including the private rented sector. It is worth him having a look at that because it partly covers what he outlined, but I will take his points on board.

That links to the hon. Gentleman's point about welfare officers. It is worth noting that in the contract extension, we agreed to put in an additional £1 million to support additional welfare officers.

I recognise that there will be issues with asylum accommodation at times as defects arise. With over 40,000 people accommodated by the Home Office, it is important that we deal with issues where we find them. I believe that the standards required by the contract, the inspection regime and the avenues through which people can raise issues and concerns, should they have them, mean that things can be resolved at an early opportunity. As I said, however, I encourage all hon. Members to contact me about any specific allegations, so that we can follow them up.

Since autumn 2016, we have undertaken work to design and develop a new model for asylum accommodation and support for after current contracts expire. We have undertaken extensive engagement with local government, non-governmental organisations and potential suppliers in a range of sectors to understand their experience of the current arrangements and their aspirations for the future.

Hon. Members have touched on the length of the new contracts. We must find a balance between ensuring that the contract is robust, reliable and delivers the services that we want, and ensuring that it is long enough for organisations to make the investments that we want to see, which are backed up by a good business case and by confidence about their future business model.

**Stuart C. McDonald:** Given that those companies were all willing to sign up to a five-year contract plus a two-year extension, surely that should be the most that we consider? There is no need to sign us up to a 10-year contract this time round.

**Brandon Lewis:** I am sure the hon. Gentleman appreciates that there is a difference between the business model and the kind of investment that people make on a longer contract compared with a shorter contract. That does not change my point about wanting to get the balance right to ensure that we have a contract length that encourages and requires organisations to make good, solid investments.

With those contracts, we will make a number of improvements as a direct result of stakeholder feedback, which I will outline before I give the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford a chance to reply. I will respond more fully to the Committee on the points that I have not been able to cover. It is important to note that we will require more proactive property management and will continue to operate a rigorous inspection regime. We will stipulate more standardisation in the initial accommodation estate—the full-board accommodation that many asylum seekers enter if they have an immediate housing need. That will ensure that there are dedicated areas for women and families and more adapted rooms for people with specific needs, including pregnant women.

The new contracts will improve service user orientation to help them live in their communities and access local services. Underpinning that will be better data sharing with relevant agencies so that they are in a better position to join people to the services they need, which covers the point that a number of hon. Members made. Building on enhancements to safeguarding that have been put in place across the immigration system in recent years, other changes will focus on safeguarding and supporting vulnerable service users. They include the introduction of standardised health checks to identify people with specific physical and mental health needs, and more uniform training for providers' staff on safeguarding best practice.

Alongside the new accommodation and support contracts, we will introduce a national contract to provide users with advice and assistance for completing applications. It will support service users through the end-to-end asylum support system, help them to co-ordinate the issues and problems that they encounter, and ensure that they are referred to the right people so that those problems can be resolved.

The advice, issues resolution and eligibility contract will provide a single contact point for service users to register complaints—thereby building a relationship—and to report problems. It will build on the work that we in the Home Office have undertaken with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that newly recognised refugees can swiftly access benefits and employment support services. We will commence procurement for that contract in 2018.

I am grateful for hon. Members' interest and input in the debate and for the passion and clarity with which they made their cases. That shows a common view that in principle, we want to ensure that we provide for people seeking asylum. That experience means that when they gain asylum, they can take part in and make

a valuable contribution to society and have a valued life of their own. That is something that we should be proud of as a country and I am determined to continue that.

2.57 pm

**Yvette Cooper:** I thank all hon. Members from the Select Committee, the Back Benches and the Front Bench who have contributed to the discussion, which I hope has been helpful. I welcome some of the points that the Minister made about the specific provisions they will put into the contracts to try to improve quality. I also welcome his commitment to ensuring that there is proper, respectful and quality support for all asylum seekers and refugees in this country.

I press the Minister on a series of additional points. First, will he or the Home Secretary come back to the Committee in a couple of months to discuss the progress of cases, specifically of pregnant asylum seekers, to ensure that they are being dealt with? Secondly, will he further consider the action needed on the issues of quality that have been raised by many hon. Members and on the individual cases of substandard quality and conditions that are not fit for people to live in, for example in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire)?

Thirdly, will the Minister reconsider the contract structure? I understand his point about the impact that a long contract can have on costs, but evidence across the public sector shows that those long-term contracts often need to be adjusted, which adds costs because circumstances change. I am not convinced that a 10-year contract is in any way a good thing for a service such as this where demands change so substantially.

Fourthly, in addition to restricting the time length and adding an additional inspection, I ask the Minister to look again at the role of local authorities. He is missing a trick and missing the opportunity to bring in the positive commitment from people in communities who want to provide support and to be part of the process of providing help for people fleeing persecution, but who, because of the way that the current system is designed, see it simply as a private sector contract and a professional process that has nothing to do with them or with communities.

The Minister referred to partnerships working together and data sharing. Data sharing is a minimum, but it is not sufficient. Local authorities have to have some responsibility and funding in place to get those partnerships in place. There needs to be a different approach that allows the positive commitment that so many communities have to supporting refugees and asylum seekers to be part of the process.

I hope the Minister has listened to the points that have been made. I welcome the fact that he has moved and responded to some areas. I hope we can continue this dialogue.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the Twelfth Report of the Home Affairs Committee, Asylum Accommodation, Session 2016-17, HC 637, and the Government Response, HC 551.

## UK Victims of IRA Attacks: Gaddafi-supplied Semtex and Weapons

[MIKE GAPES *in the Chair*]

3 pm

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Fourth Report of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, HM Government support for UK victims of IRA attacks that used Gaddafi-supplied Semtex and weapons, Session 2016-17, HC 49 and the Government response, HC 331.

It is a pleasure to introduce the debate. If I may, I will start with the words of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. In 1972, he announced on Libyan radio:

“We support the revolutionaries of Ireland, who oppose Britain and who are motivated by nationalism and religion... There are arms and there is support for the revolutionaries of Ireland... We have decided to create a problem for Britain and to drive a thorn in her side so as to make life difficult... She will pay dearly.”

Well, we did pay dearly; specifically, the victims of Gaddafi and of the IRA paid dearly, and continue to do so to this day. From the early 1970s to the 1990s, the Gaddafi regime provided many tonnes of arms and ammunition, millions of dollars of finance, lots of military training and bucketloads of explosives. A series of shipments in the mid-1980s delivered up to 10 tonnes of Semtex, an explosive synonymous with the bombings in Enniskillen, the Baltic Exchange, Warrington, the Docklands and elsewhere that we are all familiar with—all of us who saw them night after night throughout the troubles, on our television screens or more directly.

I was not a member of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs when evidence was taken, but it is very clear from reading the report that the most powerful witnesses were the victims. If I may, I will read out some of the accounts given in the report, because it is important to put our debates in this place, which are often rather academic, into a personal framework:

“Mrs Hamida Bashir, whose son was killed in the Docklands bombing in 1996, told us: ‘My words are sadly not sufficient to express the tremendous pain I feel as Inam was a lovely and kind boy’. Mrs Gemma Berezzag, whose husband was left blind, paralysed and brain-damaged in the same attack, told us: ‘My Zaoui is now very ill and getting... worse... but I will do my best to care for him as I love him and can’t imagine my life without him’. Mrs Berezzag passed away in 2016, having provided daily care for her husband for 20 years... Colin Parry, whose 12-year old son, Tim, died following the Warrington bombing in 1993, told us: ‘Describing the final moments of your child’s life is beyond words... because, as a parent, there is no greater pain or loss than the death of your child’.”

I do not think that it is possible to have taken evidence from those victims, or from others whom I have met in my current role, without being overwhelmed by their dignity, stoicism and patience. They are the politically inconvenient, the ignored, the sidelined. They deserve better.

The Committee had hoped that its report, published on 2 May, would encourage the next Government to adopt a fresh approach. What we got was this Government’s flat rejection of all 12 of our recommendations. To put it mildly, the Committee was disappointed.

Let me go through some of the background. In April 1984, PC Yvonne Fletcher was murdered outside the Libyan Embassy. Our diplomatic relations with Libya,

[Dr Andrew Murrison]

which had always been strained, were—of course—severed. On 21 December 1988, PanAm flight 103 was blown up; it crashed into the town of Lockerbie and 270 people died. The Libyan convicted, one al-Megrahi, was jailed for life, released by the Scottish Government on compassionate grounds and welcomed as a hero in Tripoli. He died three years later.

After sponsoring 25 years of mayhem in the UK and elsewhere, by 1995 Libya was said to have started coming in from the cold: it confessed to the scale of support that it had been giving to republican terrorism, and it appeared to have stopped giving assistance to the IRA. That led to Sinn Féin-IRA realising that the game was up, and thus to the negotiations that eventually led to the Good Friday agreement of 1998. Mr Blair restarted diplomatic relations with Libya in 1999, and compensation was paid to the relatives of Yvonne Fletcher and the victims of PanAm flight 103.

There followed something of a love-in between Gaddafi and Tony Blair. Mr Blair said of the man responsible for wholesale murder and butchery in the UK:

“He’s very easy to deal with. To be fair to him, there’s nothing that I’ve ever agreed with him should be done that hasn’t happened.”

No doubt he was as pleased as Punch that Shell signed an agreement at around that time for half a billion dollars-worth of gas exploration rights and that BP resumed its investment in the region. That was great for business, but it did nothing for Gaddafi’s victims. I am left wondering whether those are the British values that Tony Blair was so pleased to espouse. Well, they are not my values, and I hazard a guess that they are not the values of right hon. and hon. Members gathered in the Chamber, either. It is clear from the evidence given that the then Government missed a vital opportunity to act on behalf of IRA victims at a time when Libya was seeking a rapprochement with the west.

Of course, the UK was not the only country with Gaddafi victims among its citizens—and this is where the UK Government’s position starts to look especially shameful. The US was much more proactive, amending legislation to allow access to the frozen assets of terroristic countries and of the companies that were doing business with them. Libya then settled, but President Bush deleted the UK co-litigants from the deal. Evidence heard by the Committee suggests that the Government of Gordon Brown decided to get involved at a very late stage and that any pressure on Washington was purely tokenistic. That approach continues under the current Administration, I am sorry to say: in a letter of 20 November, the Foreign Secretary ruled out even the threat or intimation of accessing or continuing to freeze terrorist funds. That stands in stark contrast to the United States’ policy.

In 2004, Libya agreed to pay compensation to the French Government for the 170 people killed in the bombing of UTA flight 772 in 1989. The previous year, the French Government had done what the UK Government would not and still will not do: they threatened to use France’s position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council to block the lifting of sanctions in order to extract rightful compensation. The Foreign Secretary’s letter of 20 November makes it plain that

the UK still will not use its influence in the way that the French Government, with their more muscular approach, have done to good effect.

The German Government secured \$35 million in compensation for the German victims and families of those killed in the 1986 bombing of the La Belle discotheque in Berlin. It was clear to the Committee that the UK Government did not pursue compensation for UK victims with anything like the determination and vigour of the Governments of France, Germany and the US, and UK victims are entitled to ask why not.

In the early years of the coalition Government, post-Gaddafi, it seemed from the Committee’s analysis that a more robust approach was being taken. David Cameron was quite upbeat about it in his first days and weeks in office. He said:

“We need to be clear that this will be an important bilateral issue between Britain and the new Libyan authorities. Clearly we have to let this Government get their feet under the desk, but this is very high up my list of items.”—[*Official Report*, 5 September 2011; Vol. 532, c. 33.]

However, nothing transpired. No leverage was placed on de facto Governments. I visited Tripoli three times as a Defence Minister between 2012 and 2014. If victims featured at all, they were in the margins. I very much regret that and am sorry about it. Why have consecutive UK Governments taken such a laissez-faire approach to victims, in stark contrast with the US, France and Germany?

In the previous Parliament, Lord Empey’s private Member’s Bill placed a statutory duty on the UK Government to take every step they could to prevent asset release until a compensation package from Libya was agreed. That most reasonable and moderate Bill was passed by the House of Lords, but there was not enough time for it to be considered in the Commons before the end of the Session. Lord Empey’s Bill would not have challenged EU or UN strictures on seizing assets, but would have been a sign of Government intent to lever justice for victims. I commend it to the Minister and seek his advice on its further progress.

My Committee’s report put various points to the Minister. He is a good man and I know he did his very best to answer them fairly, frankly and openly. However, we are left wanting more. We need to know why the Government consider claims for compensation to victims to be a purely private matter when the US, France and Germany actively espouse the causes of their citizens. In the Minister’s view, will Libya ever offer financial compensation or are we simply kicking the can down the road? Although it is not an option I personally favour, why precisely is a UK reparations fund to give financial compensation to victims not a viable option in place of extracting reparations from Libya, a course of action the Government seem reluctant to take? What exactly will the Government do to be

“more visibly proactive on this file in the future”,

as stated in the Minister’s recent letter to the Select Committee?

The Committee that I chair is completely resolved that we will move on this matter and that justice will be done for victims. We will call the Foreign Secretary before the Committee on a regular basis to explain what progress has been made. Although our sessions are always cordial, he cannot necessarily be assured of an easy ride until this is resolved.

3.14 pm

**Jim Fitzpatrick** (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you presiding this afternoon, Mr Gapes. It is good to see the Opposition spokespersons in their places. I am very pleased to see the Minister, who is held in high regard across the House. We look forward to his response to the speech from the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). I commend his powerful critique of successive Government failures in this area, and the commitment his Committee has shown to trying to shine a light on the issue to get movement and justice for the victims who have been repeatedly, as he has ably described, let down. I am grateful to the Committee for its report and to the Government for their response, disappointing as that was.

I will be relatively brief, but I want to make a contribution primarily because in 1996 a bomb was exploded near Canary Wharf in what is now my constituency. Two people died, as described by the Chair of the Select Committee. Many were injured and many more were adversely affected by being made homeless and by the loss of business, employment and the rest. Local residents have been campaigning for compensation since that dreadful event. Indeed, the Belfast media yesterday reported:

“Tory grandee Lord Tebbit has led a delegation of IRA victims from across Great Britain to meet Home Secretary...in their quest for justice.”

Jonathan Ganesh was part of that delegation. Although he was seriously injured by the Docklands bomb—he is one of my constituents—he has tirelessly campaigned for other victims since then. For some, any solution will be too late. As the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire described, some victims were killed in the various bombings, and some have subsequently died because of their injuries. Jonathan, among many others, was supported by Mr Andrew Mackinlay, a former hon. colleague who still takes a great interest in these matters today.

The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report covers the history of UK-Libyan relations since the bombing and discusses compensation options. It clarifies how frustrating the issue has been for the victims, who are still waiting. As the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire described, there have been several exchanges recently between parliamentary colleagues and the Foreign Office, specifically the Foreign Secretary, to try to move the issue on. The fact that there was a meeting yesterday with the Home Secretary and a meeting last month with the Foreign Secretary indicates greater Government interest, which is no doubt very much due to the efforts of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

I want to highlight three misunderstandings that I think still exist between us, in the hope that it is helpful, but first I recognise the excellent work being done in the other place by Lord Empey and supporters to address this long-standing grievance. As the Chair of the Select Committee said, we hope that his sterling efforts might yet bear fruit. The three areas of misunderstanding that I wish to address, and hope that the Minister will comment upon, are: first, the power of the UK Government to take legal action against Libya; secondly, the ability of the UK Government to compensate victims until Libya can make good its debt; and thirdly, the shape of some of the compensation.

In discussion with the Foreign Secretary, colleagues from Northern Ireland expressed the view that there was a need for a new institution there to treat the serious health issues, especially mental health and trauma issues, faced by victims. I do not want to disagree with that—I see the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is here—and I do not know whether that is needed, but those parliamentary colleagues know their area much better than I. My point in respect of that as an issue for the Foreign Office is that it does nothing for my victims and is therefore not a complete solution.

The second point is whether the Government should fill the vacuum until the situation in Libya stabilises, after which we might be able to reach agreement on what is owed by whom. Again, that was raised by the Chair of the Select Committee. This would include the £9.5 billion of assets frozen in London and mentioned in recommendation 9 on page 5 of the report. What is most upsetting for victims is that other countries have secured compensation as outlined in the report, but our Government have not, as is mentioned in recommendation 12 on page 8.

That brings me to the third point of misunderstanding. Other countries have been able to secure payments from Libya. When we met the Foreign Secretary, I understood him to say that in the case of American victims, for example, the Libyans paid up under the threat of legal action—a threat that the USA then waived. Perhaps that is my misunderstanding of the discussion that we had with the Foreign Office, but the bottom line is that US citizens, and those of other countries, received compensation, whereas our victims are dying, or struggling to live, without any.

The correspondence of 20 November from the Foreign Secretary to parliamentary colleagues who attended the meeting mentioned by the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire clearly highlights the misunderstandings I have referred to. In the letter, the Foreign Secretary said:

“I was also pleased we were able to agree that...we should not call on UK taxpayer monies to establish a compensation fund...we concluded that UK Government discussions with the Libyans should focus on exploring the possibility of a fund to focus on community support, rehabilitation and reconciliation, and not on monetary compensation for individual victims”.

Colleagues who were at that meeting did not agree that we should not call on the UK taxpayer. The Government might think that it is not appropriate to do so, but some of us believe that it is. As for the focus on community support, some colleagues in Northern Ireland want some community support, as I mentioned, but that was not the focus for many of those representing mainland victims.

The Foreign Secretary went on to say:

“At our meeting, we discussed the feasibility of the UK using its veto in the UN Security Council...to prevent the unfreezing of assets until the Libyans had agreed to pay compensation to UK victims.”

He went on:

“The Foreign Office’s assessment is that it is extremely unlikely any other members of the Security Council would support such action to block the unfreezing of Libyan assets”.

I thought that the essence of a veto was that we did not need the other members of the Security Council. If the UK imposes a veto, it applies to everyone. That is one of the most powerful weapons that we have for reaching an

[*Jim Fitzpatrick*]

agreement in our negotiations with the Libyans. I know that the Libyans say that we owe them money for other aspects of foreign policy, but it is a negotiation, and so far we do not seem to be entering into it.

Finally, the letter clarifies the position:

“In the US, an exception to the defence of dispositive foreign immunity was provided to enable victims to sue foreign States who are designated as being state sponsors of terrorism...the UK has no such exemption for state sponsored terrorism”.

The question that some of us were asking was why we do not have the same power in the UK, for our victims, as US citizens have for theirs. If that would take Government regulation, or legislation, I should think it would command support across the House.

In concluding I want to quote the words of Matt Jury of McCue Law, which has been involved with colleagues, in supporting the victims over many years. I think that what he says applies to the majority of those campaigning on the issue:

“Most of us involved continue to oppose the Government’s policy on this. The Government should be espousing the victims’ claims rather than obliging them to fend for themselves. The Government should be taking proactive steps to use the leverage it has to force a resolution. Payment of compensation directly to the victims is the only satisfactory resolution...Assessing victims’ eligibility for such compensation is no barrier and can be readily done. If Libya will not settle the victims’ claims now then, as recommended by the NIAC, the Government should do so in lieu and recover such monies itself from Libya at a later date. The Government should give further consideration to the use of its veto at the UNSC to prevent the unfreezing of assets until Libya has paid compensation.”

The campaign continues. There is renewed interest from the Foreign Secretary and Home Secretary, and the Government are demonstrating much keener interest in the issue than any UK Government have done for years; I hope that indicates that they are more interested than they were in a resolution, in spite of the misunderstandings I have mentioned—on which I do not place huge importance, because everyone can take different things from different meetings. I hope that the Minister can give us some encouragement and say that the report of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee takes us further along the road.

3.25 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to contribute to a debate on an issue that greatly affects us in Northern Ireland. I thank the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), for raising the issue and setting the scene so well, and my colleague the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), who outlined the case on behalf of his constituents.

It is important to have a Northern Ireland perspective on the matter, because the report was produced by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. I was not a member of the Committee when the report was produced; I have been on it only a short time, and am pleased to serve under the chairmanship of the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire. I make no apologies for rising to speak again on the issue. Indeed, instead of an apology I make a promise, along with the rest of my colleagues in this place—those who are not here but would have liked to

attend and speak—that we will keep on raising the issue until our constituents receive some form of recognition and justice.

I am pleased to see the Minister in his place, as well as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman). The Minister knows that everyone in the House has the utmost respect for him. It goes without saying that I do. However, there are things that must be said today, and I do not want him to feel that I am in any way attacking him; I am not, but I have to make my points clearly. I want to say that before I begin, because it has never been my way to attack people. I do not do that in the House; it is not my form.

There may be some who think that we have heard it all before and do not need to hear the details of the atrocities again: we know it was terrible. However, I will repeat what was done with Libyan-sponsored Semtex and arms, to remind the House that what we are discussing is not simply statements of support, which are bad enough, but action that caused horrific deaths and injuries that have lasted until today. Many people carry and share those burdens of injury and trauma: families who are without parents, without children, and without loved ones. At present they are also, I am sad to say—with great respect to the Minister and the Government—without a Government who are determined to put oil interests aside and put the interests of justice and their people first. I hope I am wrong in saying that. I look kindly towards the Minister and want him to prove me wrong, please.

I read a summary in *The Guardian* that set the scene well, and will quote from it to give a wee bit of perspective on where we are, among the passionate contributions that have been made to the debate so far, and those that will follow:

“In the early 1970s and later in the 80s, Muammar Gaddafi’s regime supplied the Provisional IRA with tonnes of weapons including semtex explosive, which was made in the Czech Republic. The odourless semtex was used as a powerful booster for bombs that devastated parts of the City of London”,

as the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse mentioned, “as well as other British cities during the latter days of the Troubles.

The Gaddafi regime also supplied more than 1,000 assault rifles to the IRA—enough to arm two infantry battalions. On top of the guns the then Libyan regime also smuggled flame-throwers, Soviet-made grenades, mines and anti-aircraft weapons to the IRA”

to take down helicopters. Those were weapons of war to murder people across the country of Northern Ireland—men, women and children.

I suppose we all watch war films, but that was not the stuff of “Rambo” or “The Expendables”. It was about the lives of people in my community, members of my family and, indeed, members of other communities across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. People’s lives have been torn to shreds, and that was facilitated by Gaddafi and his regime. Today we in this House are charged with the responsibility of making the point clearly and as strongly as possible, and of looking to the Minister for a comprehensive and helpful response.

Libyan-supplied Semtex was used in bombings that included the Harrods department store attack in 1983, the Warrington bomb in 1993 on the mainland, which has been referred to, and countless atrocities in Northern Ireland—almost too many to mention. We could do a

roll-call, but it is not about that; but we need to encapsulate the issue and the strength of feeling. As we stood around cenotaphs in Northern Ireland, we thought not only of those who died in the world wars and other wars, but of the service personnel who lost their life in the troubles. Even more poignantly, this year we marked the 30th anniversary of the Enniskillen bombing, when 11 people were murdered at the cenotaph on Remembrance Sunday. That murder was carried out by way of a bomb made up of products supplied by Gaddafi. There is no argument about that; it is what the facts of the case say.

Thirty years later, while Americans who were injured or bereaved in this way have seen their country secure a form of restitution, our people who lived through some of the most horrible atrocities day in and day out, and who saw entire communities shredded to pieces, are still asking for some form of recognition. Quite clearly, our point of view has to be heard.

I have said it in this Chamber before, and I will say it again, as other right hon. Member and hon. Members have done: no amount of money can heal a broken heart, but it can help to pay the bills of those who are left behind, such as the one-parent households where there should be two parents. Money cannot walk a daughter down the aisle when her dad is not there, but it can take off some of the burden and stress of paying for the wedding, which will not be the same. Money cannot bring mothers home, but it can allow a dad to work less, so that he can do more elsewhere. My constituents deserve reparation, as do yours, Mr Gapes, and the constituents of all of us in this Chamber. The Government must do their part to provide it.

It is for that reason that I feel particularly disheartened by the response of the Government up until now; I am almost grieved to say that I feel so annoyed about this issue, as many others do. I am particularly disheartened to find that the call by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee for a reparation fund—I sit on the Committee now but did not at the time it made that call—has been summarily rejected, and that there is to be no use of the UK's influence regarding its political or financial support to Libya as leverage to secure reparation. How frustrated are all three of us who have spoken today and those who will follow afterwards? There are people in the Gallery who are victims, or supporters of this cause, and they feel equally burdened and let down.

I constantly ask Ministers to use whatever diplomatic pressure they can to bring about changes in human rights in countries that we give financial aid to and trade with. That is part of my job as the chair of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief; the Minister speaks out forcefully on those issues, as we all do. I am given assurances that we use that influence in those cases, so why is this situation any different? Why are we making this point in the House today? Why is it not in the UK's best interests to use what influence we have to get justice for our own? Are we a second-class nation, compared with the USA? I certainly hope that we are not. The USA secured a \$1.5 billion compensation fund for American victims of terror attacks that were blamed on Libya, including the Lockerbie bombing, which many of us vividly remember.

Are our deaths less important than those US deaths? Do we care less for our own than the US does? Are we the poor relations to Americans and their rights? Quite clearly, the answer to that is: no, we are not, and neither

should we be. We need to address this issue. We are the greatest seat of democracy in the world, and what a privilege it is to sit in this House as a Member of Parliament and to speak on behalf of our people. Why are we not able to use that influence to help our people who have been hurt by an evil man who was set on destroying British people by any means possible?

The hon. Member for South West Wiltshire gave the real thrust of what Gaddafi was about. These were attacks on our democratic process, our British way of life, and our right to stand up for freedom and democracy. That is why we speak out on behalf of the victims today.

The response of the Government to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's report is—may I say so, Mr Gapes?—insulting at best and at worst could be classified as neglectful. As I have said, it was not statements by Gaddafi that led to these atrocities; it was actions. It is not statements of sympathy by this Government that will lead to healing; it is action. With respect, it is not platitudes or words that we want; it is actions and compensation for the victims of Libyan terrorism.

The refusal of the Government to step up and move out for our people cannot be accepted. That is why we are today again talking about the Libyan state sponsorship of IRA terrorism. We demand more from our Government and from our Minister. Please give us no more words of sympathy; give us action. Stand up and use what we have to say to people, “Your—our—loss is important enough for us to take real and meaningful steps. You are as important to us as the US citizens are to their Government.”

We can understand how frustrated, angry and dismayed people are when they see what is happening. We are expressing those feelings on their behalf in a small way—not with the same personal feeling, because we were not part of those events, although some of us served in uniform so perhaps were, in a small way, part of the process in which those around us lost their lives.

Minister, here are some direct questions that I feel I must ask and that we need a response to. Taking into account the indisputable fact that the Libyans played a massive, direct, deliberate, murderous and brutal part in a campaign of murder of hundreds of people UK-wide, why is a UK reparations fund for victims not a “viable option”? What does “not a viable option” mean? Do the Government not understand the issues? Why is it not in the UK's national interest to use political or financial support for Libya as leverage to secure compensation for victims? As the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse said, why not use the funds that are frozen in British bank accounts? If we have them, let us use them for our people and make sure that they are looked after. To whom is our responsibility? To our people, so let us have answers that grasp the importance of the issue, and the nettle.

My conclusion is simple. I say to my Government, my Prime Minister and my Minister that if we wanted to take back our sovereignty—that is why we are leaving Europe—it is because we wanted as a nation to stand on our own. What kind of a nation would we be if we did not stand up for our own? What kind of people are we when we do not look compassionately at lives decimated by evil, and do not offer more than sympathy? That is not the country that I believe we are; I believe that we are better than that, and we need to prove it. We must act in this matter in a very British way, which is supporting

[*Jim Shannon*]

the rule of law and justice, standing up and speaking out for what is right, and championing the underdog, which is what many of us do in this Chamber on a regular basis.

Minister, we look to you, because you are the Minister who will respond, and I urge you to do the right thing. Provide the support; take steps to see moneys released; and send this statement to those who target our citizens for whatever reason: “Target us and we will not take it lightly, but will instead respond”—not necessarily militarily, but in a way that is financially helpful to the victims. The sun never set on our nation; that was something I learned at school, which was not yesterday. Our nation abolished slavery, championed the right to live a free life, and promotes the most basic of all human rights: the right to life. That is the nation that I am proud to be a part of—the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. All of us in this Chamber are part to be proud of it, and are of the same mindset.

Renew our pride, remind other nations exactly who we are, and let us do what we should have done years ago: get recognition and financial help for those who have been bereaved or injured by Libyan-sponsored state terrorism.

3.37 pm

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes.

I welcome the work of the Committee and its report, and I commend the Chair, the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), for a very powerful contribution setting out the Committee’s findings, as well as its response to the Government’s response. I note the cross-party and consensual basis on which the Committee has operated, both before and after the election. It is one of the few Select Committees of the House on which the Scottish National party does not have representation, but I have read the Committee’s conclusions and the Government’s response with some interest.

The delay in the Government’s response is perhaps yet another regrettable consequence of the general election, but I am glad that following its publication we now finally have the opportunity to debate both it and the Committee’s report.

I think that it is pretty clear—from the report itself, from the Government response and from the contributions that we have heard today—that successive United Kingdom Governments have been found wanting in this area. There has been a series of missed opportunities, dating back at least to the time of Tony Blair, to sort out the issue of compensation.

It is also clear that there must now be renewed efforts, dialogue and fresh thinking to ensure that the victims receive the support and compensation that they deserve. I note in the findings of the report—the Chair of the Committee also emphasised this—that for some of these victims and their families time is beginning to run out, and we must make every effort to make sure that justice delayed does not turn out to be justice denied.

I accept that there is a range of diplomatic and legal challenges, which have already been set out and covered. Of course, there are serious issues about the stability of Libya, including the efforts to establish a functioning

Government with which we could have any kind of diplomatic dialogue. As an aside, I note that the UK Government have spent much more time bombing that country than they have done trying to rebuild it and restore some kind of stability. I also understand that there might well be legal hurdles in releasing frozen assets, but the question has rightly been asked about whether every legal and diplomatic option is being pursued. What support can the Government provide for efforts such as Lord Empey’s Bill, which was mentioned?

We welcome the support available for victims and their families, and the Government’s response lists various trusts and funds that victims can turn to. We need to ensure that everyone who might have cause to access those things is aware of the opportunities. I pay particular tribute to the work of the Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Peace Foundation. I had the privilege and honour of visiting the Peace Centre in Warrington earlier this year. I have a number of constituents who have been affected not by IRA terrorism, but by terrorism overseas and, sadly, the growing terrorist threat leads to a continuing need for the work of that centre. I was deeply moved and inspired by the innovative work that goes on there, and I had the privilege to meet Colin Parry briefly in passing while I was there. I pay tribute to the work that is going on, but more clearly needs to be done.

We recognise the importance of and sensitivities around this issue. We hope that progress will continue to be sought on a cross-party basis and as consensually as possible. It is clear from the contributions to this debate and from the report that the UK Government must leave no stone unturned in seeking compensation and providing victims with the support they need and deserve.

3.41 pm

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. First, I bring the apologies of my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound). He has an engagement in his constituency and I am standing in in his place.

I begin by thanking the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) for his work and that of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. He made a powerful speech. Excellent speeches have also been made by my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

We in the Labour party are proud of the role we played in bringing about peace in Northern Ireland. We believe that we have a duty to protect that legacy and move it forward. We in this House must never forget the pain, hurt and destruction that the troubles brought to many people in Northern Ireland and throughout the United Kingdom. The debate focuses our minds on that.

The Labour Government worked to move the Gaddafi regime away from the production of weapons of mass destruction and towards acceding to the chemical weapons convention in 2004 with the hope of providing greater stability in the region. I accept the disappointment expressed by the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire about the treatment of victims by Governments of all stripes.

The Select Committee's report concerns an important issue. The Committee took evidence from victims and victims advocacy organisations along with their lawyers. The report, "HM Government support for UK victims of IRA attacks that used Gaddafi-supplied Semtex and weapons", makes some recommendations on what the Government can do to support victims.

The potential use of an estimated £9.5 billion of frozen Libyan assets to provide compensation to victims is mentioned on page 23, where paragraph 62 states:

"The FCO told the Committee that the EU Regulation prohibited the release of frozen assets in the UK without a licence from HM Treasury."

The hon. Member for South West Wiltshire is lucky that I am responding to this debate, and not my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North, because I am the Opposition Front Bencher responsible for the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill that is coming down the tracks. It is currently in the Lords and will come to our House in February. I accept what the Foreign Office says about the legal framework provided by the EU regulations and the United Nations Security Council limiting the room for manoeuvre, but either in the other place or when the Bill comes to us Ministers could consider the scope for making amendments to the regime to make some progress in the way the Select Committee suggests. I am not saying that that will happen, or that is possible, but Ministers should certainly make an undertaking, because there is clearly a potential legislative vehicle for this.

The Committee is calling on the Government to do more to negotiate a settlement with the Libyan Government and broker compensation arrangements similar to those made by the United States Government. We accept the Foreign Office's assessment that that cannot be handled speedily and ultimately might not be successful. At the same time, Her Majesty's Opposition hold to the view that in the immediate term the Government should provide a special pension to all those who were seriously injured as a result of troubles-related incidents, as advocated by many groups that represent the interests of victims.

The Government know they have a duty to ensure that those individuals receive the right assistance and support in coping with life-changing injuries. A victim's pension would provide for those who may not have been able to build up an occupational pension over the years and may have additional and complex care needs due to their injuries. That should cover not only the victims referred to in the report, but all victims. The Government could consider that now. As the years go by, more victims who have been affected pass away. As the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) pointed out, the issue is becoming increasingly urgent as time goes on.

It is only right that the Government stand up for the victims of all atrocities that occurred throughout Northern Ireland's troubled and painful past, both internationally and here at home. We welcome the Committee's report and the work it does in standing up for people in Northern Ireland and beyond. It is time for the Government to take more action.

3.47 pm

**The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt):** It is a particular pleasure to serve under your chairmanship

in a debate such as this, Mr Gapes, knowledgeable as you are of foreign affairs. You will know the issue extremely well, so it is good to see you in your place.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) for securing the debate and, through him, all the Members of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee for their continuing commitment to supporting the victims' cause in Parliament. I thank other colleagues for their pertinent contributions today, which give plenty of food for thought.

As the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) was gracious enough to acknowledge, when we look back at the past and the opportunities that might have been missed, this is not a great chapter for any Government, but it is important to remember that these events were not brought about by the British Government; the report refers to a period of time when Gaddafi was supplying weaponry to the IRA. I gently say to my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that it was not the Libyan people taking action against the people of Northern Ireland or the United Kingdom. It was Gaddafi following his own determination and his political beliefs at the time, and that makes it difficult when we are talking about retrospective balance between those who were victims of Gaddafi in Libya and those who were victims of Gaddafi here. I visited Abu Salim jail. I have seen the place where Gaddafi machine-gunned about 1,200 people in an act of revenge for some attack on his regime. Part of the instinct behind the communal fund, which we will come on to, is to recognise that the people in both places suffered under that man. That is why attempting to find a way to recognise that in a manner that benefits all victims has been so important.

**Jim Shannon:** All Members who made a contribution mentioned the conversation that the United States Government have had. They made a very clear distinction. Why can we not make the same distinction? I respect the Minister greatly, and he knows that, but I have to speak on behalf of my constituents in Northern Ireland. The US Government have done it. Why do we not do the same?

**Alistair Burt:** Perhaps I can come on to the United States situation a bit later. Distinctions between types of victims are difficult, and I will come on to that a little later on. First, let me put something on the record in relation to our current policy. I recognise the force of today's debate, of the conversations that the Foreign Secretary has had in my presence, and of the discussions that I have had as well. This is a difficult area of policy, and it may not be finally settled.

I would like to take the opportunity once again to express on behalf of the Government sincere condolences to all those who have suffered as a result of the horrific attacks carried out by the IRA, and to all victims of the troubles. The Government want a just solution for all victims of Gaddafi-sponsored IRA terrorism, and we will continue to do all we can to make progress on that important but difficult agenda. The Government have raised the plight of victims of Gaddafi-sponsored IRA terrorism with the Libyan authorities at the highest level. The Foreign Secretary raised their cases with Prime Minister Sarraj during both of his visits to Tripoli, most recently in August this year. I intend to follow up on those conversations when I next travel to Libya.

[Alistair Burt]

Between 2010 and 2013, when I travelled to Libya I always raised the issue of compensation because it was a live issue back then. I raised it with either the then Attorney General or the then Solicitor General in Scotland—I cannot remember which—whom I got to know in relation to this matter. It was always on the agenda in the period of time after the fall of Gaddafi. The Libyan Government were obviously in a state of flux at that time, which of course has continued, hampering all our efforts, but it was important to put the claims on the record right the way through, and I sought to do so.

The Foreign Secretary and I welcomed our constructive recent discussions with parliamentarians, and I have recently met with victims groups to discuss their thoughts and concerns face to face. I very much hope that we can continue to engage openly and frankly, and I am sure that we will. That will give us the best possible chance of securing justice for the victims of these terrible attacks.

Clearly, the Libyan Government have a responsibility to deal with the legacy at the heart of the Gaddafi regime, as part of a broader process of national and international reconciliation and justice. The UK Government continue to impress upon the Libyan authorities the impact of Gaddafi's support for the IRA, and we emphasise the importance we attach to responding to victims' campaigns. We continue to judge, however, that engaging constructively with the Libyan Government remains the best way to make progress. As our response to the Select Committee report demonstrated, we maintain the long-standing policy of previous UK Governments not to espouse victims' claims.

Hon. Members who took part in the recent meeting with the Foreign Secretary will be aware that that issue was discussed in some depth. They will also be aware that the Foreign Secretary committed the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to being more visible in efforts to support the victims' campaigns and to ensuring that the issue remains a priority in our discussions with the Libyan Government. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) spoke about how that more visible attitude might be demonstrated. I am going back to Libya, for the first time in some years, early in the new year. We are actively seeking to explore the possibility of a meeting between the Libyan Minister of Justice and victims groups; we have recently written to the Minister about that. The meeting might take place in Libya, but that could be difficult, so it could be held in Tunisia or some other place. We are actively pursuing that idea as a way of doing something new and adding something new to the situation.

Questions were raised about whether we have abandoned the idea of a fund to compensate individual victims. We have carefully considered that option, but continue to believe that individual claims are best negotiated directly between victims and the Libyan authorities. We will continue to support victims to help to facilitate that, and we will raise their cases with the Libyan authorities at every opportunity. Even if the Libyans were at some point in the future to put aside money for the purposes of compensating UK victims, we believe that administering such a fund would be extremely difficult. There is currently no clear definition of a victim of IRA terrorism sponsored by Gaddafi as opposed to a victim of terrorism more generally.

Hon. Members who were present at the recent meeting with the Foreign Secretary will be aware that that issue was discussed at length. My impression is that at the end of the meeting we believed that, given the difficulties of drawing distinctions between different types of victims, the best kind of support would be a communal fund, focusing on community support, rehabilitation and reconciliation, that was available to all victims. It would not be confined to Northern Ireland, to respond to the concerns of the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse. It has not been drawn up in any way yet, but it would attempt to recognise the difficulty of separating one victim of the troubles from another, and to bring people together. Giving specific help to specific people who have been damaged, as the hon. Member for Strangford clearly described, would be an important part of it, so he would be providing something for his constituents, but in a communal fund that would be accessible to more people, rather than just through individual compensation.

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** Just to clarify, the Minister referred to the possibility of victims meeting the Libyan Minister of Justice directly, perhaps in Tunisia because Libya could be difficult. Some of us have concerns about putting victims in front of a high-level politician and diplomat, given the imbalance in terms of strength. However, I understand that the emotiveness of it might create a breakthrough. I just raise the concern about exposing the victims in that way.

The second point—sorry, Mr Gapes; I will be very brief—is about identifying the entitlement for individual victims and having community assets. Other countries seem to have done it, and I do not understand why we cannot. I totally support colleagues from Northern Ireland who are asking for a centre or an institution for trauma, mental health, mental welfare and so on, because that would be useful for them. It would not serve a purpose for the people in Tower Hamlets who were direct victims, and that is where there is a distinction between the two.

**Alistair Burt:** Let me respond as best I can to those two comments. I take the hon. Gentleman's point about the meeting, but my sense is that there would be sufficient victims and victims' representatives who would be prepared to take part in such a meeting. It would not be an unmoderated meeting and, of course, I would expect us to be there in some form, whether through embassy officials locally or senior officers from here; in those circumstances, there would probably also be a Minister. I do not think it would be appropriate to ask a Minister from another state, unconnected with all this, to deal with the issue without one of our Ministers being prepared to support those who had come from the United Kingdom. I am sure that we could handle that, but I accept his point that for some people such a meeting would be too difficult and not possible.

In relation to the hon. Gentleman's other point, there is no suggestion that because the fund has not yet been created or put together, it would be confined to one place rather than another. If the point is to find something that will benefit victims wherever they have been, it must of course apply to mainland UK as well as Northern Ireland. I do not think that those in other countries have had to make an individual distinction between a victim of Gaddafi-sponsored terrorism and a victim of

a terrorist atrocity from another source. That is something that we find difficult and, as we have discussed, we all understand those difficulties.

**Jim Shannon:** To follow on from the point made by the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), it is quite clear to me, and I suspect to everyone in the Chamber, that if someone was blown up by Semtex, or there were an explosion in which Semtex were used, it was Gaddafi-inspired and sponsored terrorism. If they were shot with a bullet from an AK47, that was Gaddafi-sponsored terrorism. If they were shot by a self-loading rifle, an SA80 or something different, that certainly was not Gaddafi-sponsored terrorism. If we want a factual, historical way of collating what has taken place, I suggest that the weapon or bomb used is an indication of where it came from and its intention. It is therefore easy to diagnose. Forgive me, but I see it very simply. If someone was blown up with Semtex in London or shot by an AK47 rifle in London or anywhere else, that is Gaddafi-sponsored terrorism.

**Alistair Burt:** I understand the hon. Gentleman completely. It is not difficult to make a distinction based on cause of death, but is he saying that there would be a different system of compensation, and that someone who lost their life in circumstances identifiably traced to Gaddafi would have access to one fund, but those who died in other circumstances would not? That is what successive Governments have found difficult, because the impact of the loss of life due to a terrorist incident is the same, whatever the cause was. It would be difficult to have a fund that distinguished victims and gave some victims and their families access to something that others are denied.

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** It is patently unfair that some victims may not get compensation and others would. The distinction we are drawing, in the absence of a UK fund to compensate victims of terrorism *per se*, is that the Libyans have paid other Governments in other countries money to compensate their victims. Apparently, we have not been making the same efforts to get Libyan compensation for our victims. If we can get that for the victims who can be identified, let us get them compensation. The British Government ought to be looking after the other victims of terrorism, as I hope they do, from whichever source the terrorism outrage comes.

**Jim Shannon** *rose*—

**Alistair Burt:** I am happy to take the other intervention if it is on the same topic.

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) has clearly hit the nail on the head. The United States Government made the distinction. There is a way of making the distinction. They did it and have shown us how to do it, and I suggest that we do the same. They have done it, and so can we.

**Alistair Burt:** Of course, in the particular case of the Lockerbie victims, the UK Government intervened directly to secure compensation. However, as we have discussed, individual compensation is being pursued through private claims, and we have sought to facilitate that work through our contacts and everything we have done in relation to that. We still believe that that is the most

appropriate thing to do, and that is why we deal directly with the Libyan authorities. We have approached individual compensation differently. The allocation of the compensation fund illustrates the difficulty of individual compensation, but of course if such claims are successful, that deals with that issue. However, as successive Governments have done, we have supported the individual pursuit of claims rather than doing on it on a Government basis. That is different from those who have chosen to do it another way—that is quite right. That is the process we have chosen, and that is the process we are continuing to support.

**Dr Murrison:** I am following what the Minister has to say closely. He is making a convincing argument, but the central fact remains that our closest allies—the US, France and Germany—have secured substantial reparations from the country responsible for those acts. The legal entity, notwithstanding the Minister's remarks about Gaddafi, is Libya. We have failed to do that, and it is about time that our victims got a better deal. I am sure the Minister agrees with that. The only debate is about how we are going to achieve it. How we dish the money out is a second-order issue. It is important that we get the money in the first place.

**Alistair Burt:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are continuing to pursue that process by working with the existing Libyan Government and the future Libyan Government to secure that support. That is why a meeting with the Libyan Minister for Justice has been suggested. That is why the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister raised this issue, and why I shall raise it.

Hon. Members and victims have understandably asked us to demonstrate even more effort to secure compensation than we have already put in. The ultimate aim is to ensure the Libyan Government is able to respond to the understandable request for compensation for the victims of Gaddafi. That is the position we want to reach. The UK Government, like all of us, are determined to make sure that happens. That is the process we are pursuing.

There are a couple of other things to say. I want to deal with the issue of frozen assets and sanctions. There is no lawful basis on which the UK could seize or change the ownership of any Libyan assets. The UN Security Council resolution under which those assets were frozen, which the UK supported, is clear that they should eventually be returned for the benefit of the Libyan people. To breach that resolution would be a violation of international law. We set that out in our response to the Committee, and that position has not changed.

A veto is an individual response that the United Kingdom could produce, but it would then be used to stop the return of assets. As the Government rightly said, we get no sense from other states that they would support that. Of course, they do not have to do anything—it is our veto—but they would not necessarily understand our vetoing a policy that is designed to return moneys to those who would then be in a position to compensate the United Kingdom and the victims the United Kingdom is pursuing that for. To apply a veto may not be the most appropriate thing. The point that the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse and others made is that it is a form of pressure on Libya, which must be correct. We must find other ways of putting pressure on the Libyans

[*Alistair Burt*]

so that when they are in a position to respond, they understand that they need to make that response. Our contact with the Libyan Government makes it clear to us that they understand that need, but the money is not there at the moment because it is just not there. We must continue to pursue that.

On the sanctions, when the European sanctions rules are changed, we will have to see whether that provides an extra opportunity. I was interested by what the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland said, and that will form part of a further discussion in the future. I noted what she said about pensions. As far as I am aware, that is something new, but we may come back to it in due course.

That is what we are doing in the immediate future, and as far as the future is concerned we will pursue a twin-track approach. We will continue to help victims engage directly with the Libyan Government, as appropriate, to help them pursue their campaign. That is the policy we have followed. As I said, I have previously informed victims that we are exploring the possibility of a meeting for them with the Libyan Minister of Justice. Our embassy in Tripoli has raised this with the Minister several times, and he has agreed in principle to the proposal. I recently wrote to him to welcome that, and to stress our desire to press ahead with arrangements. Such a meeting would demonstrate the Libyan Government's genuine desire to address the legacy of the Gaddafi regime. In addition, we will explore with the Libyan authorities the possibility of establishing a communal fund for victims, although I should be honest with hon. Members that the current political and economic crisis in Libya means that progress on that is likely to be slow, as the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland said.

There are complex questions at stake with regard to compensation, such as which groups of victims would be eligible, and what type of compensation and support would be right. We discussed that during the course of the debate. Discussions about what a fund would look like are still at an early stage, but we anticipate that it would focus on community support, rehabilitation and reconciliation, and as I said earlier would be accessible to all victims throughout the United Kingdom. I welcome the recent engagement of Democratic Unionist party colleagues on this issue, and I look forward to further constructive discussions in the future. We recognise victims' frustration at the slow rate of progress. I fully appreciate that although that is an easy sentence for a Minister to say, it cannot in any way cover the pain and suffering that people have been through, but the political, economic and security realities in Libya are making progress on the issue extremely difficult.

The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and I have all made clear the Government's support for change in Libya and for the UN process being led by Ghassan Salamé. We are actively engaged in that because the sooner the process can be successful and the sooner Libya has stabilisation and a new Government, the easier it will be to press such matters still further.

I repeat the Government's sincere commitment to help the victims of Gaddafi-sponsored IRA terrorism make progress. I express my gratitude for the positive way in which colleagues from across the House have engaged with the Government on this issue and my sincere desire for that to continue. I recognise that the

slow process is deeply frustrating to all those who represent the victims, as well as to those victims themselves, many of whom have campaigned tirelessly for many years to achieve justice. Today's debate and the determination of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire and other hon. Members in the Chamber make an impression. Clearly, this is an issue on which the Government are committed, but the determination and the desire of the House is plainly that we have to do more, to be seen to do more and to explore further ways in which we can redress the balance.

I am grateful as always for the kindness with which colleagues treat me, and hope that I can play my part in resolving the issue. I take that to heart.

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** I have one last question for the Minister. As has been mentioned by the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, obviously there have been efforts in the other place to help move things along. Has the Minister had a chance to look at that, and will he comment? I am not asking him to compromise or undermine those efforts in any way, but they were mentioned by several colleagues and it would be useful if the Government had words on that aspect of the situation.

**Alistair Burt:** No. I am aware of the private Member's Bill going through the Lords. I have no particular response. This is something at the moment—in relation to frozen assets—that we do not currently have being considered. But the Department is considering it very carefully, as will Ministers.

Let me conclude and again thank my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire for bringing the matter forward. I am fully aware that it is not one that will be dealt with in an afternoon and then go away. Victims and those who represent them have my commitment, and the Foreign Secretary made it clear at his recent meeting with colleagues how important this is to us. It is difficult to unblock but it is clear that we have an imperative from the House to do just that.

4.12 pm

**Dr Murrison:** I will be as brief as possible, Mr Gapes.

Libya is potentially an extremely wealthy country. It has governance issues, to put it mildly, with which the United Kingdom is assisting. Governance falls into this piece nicely, since compensation for victims is certainly a governance thing. I hope very much that, as we continue to put considerable resource into Libya, we will remind our interlocutors at every available opportunity that they have duties to us as well. I am pleased to hear from the Minister that he is renewing his commitment to getting for victims the justice that they deserve.

I am also pleased that the Minister acknowledged, I think, that the legal entity in this debate is Libya. I fully appreciate that the Libyan people, broadly defined, are not responsible for the actions that we associate with Gaddafi; nevertheless it is Libya to which we have to look for retribution in this particular case. It seems to me odd, if we are improving the governance of a country, as we are in Libya, that we do not make that very apparent to the Libyans. Clearly we need to do so.

I very much hope that the Minister takes note of the noble Lord Empey's private Member's Bill. It seems to me to have merit, and there may be a way of advancing

the issue so as not to conflict with European Union law as long as that applies in the United Kingdom, or more particularly, with United Nations rules, which will continue to apply to the United Kingdom.

The Minister will have read paragraph 61 of the report that we are debating and will have noted that on a significant number of occasions, frozen assets have been accessed, notably President Marcos's Swiss bank account in the interests of rectifying human rights abuses in the Philippines, the assets of Colombian paramilitaries and, most relevantly, frozen assets in the US in respect of Saddam Hussein's victims and the victims of Iranian and Cuban terrorism. There is precedent; it is clearly not impossible to access those sums, and it is certainly not impossible to threaten to access those sums.

My concern and perhaps that of the members of my Committee is that the Government at the least give the impression that this subject is not a top priority for them. I will accept the reassurances of the Minister and I note that in his comments in response to the report he agreed that there needs to be a better perception of Government's efforts—but there also need to be better efforts underpinning that perception.

I hope very much that in the months ahead we will redouble our efforts when dealing with our Libyan interlocutors to impress on them how important this matter is to the British people. It is just not acceptable to wait, as happens at the moment, for victims to age and pass on, as too many have, without getting the justice that is their due. British values have to do with justice. They are about getting what is right for victims. Clearly, the victims of Gaddafi-sponsored IRA terrorism have not had justice, and I look to the Minister to ensure that they do. I look forward to him or the Foreign Secretary appearing, in the not-too-distant future, before my Select Committee to report on progress.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the Fourth Report of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, HM Government support for UK victims of IRA attacks that used Gaddafi-supplied Semtex and weapons, Session 2016-17, HC 49, and the Government response, HC 331.

4.16 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statements

Thursday 14 December 2017

## ATTORNEY GENERAL

### Victims of Sexual Offences: Protection in Court

**The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright):** The Government are committed to ensuring that victims are supported throughout the criminal justice system. This is particularly so for victims of sexual violence: a devastating and traumatic crime.

Sections 41 to 43 of the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999 Act came into force in 2000 and provide critical protection for complainants in sex offence cases by tightly restricting the circumstances in which the defence can introduce evidence relating to the complainant's sexual history.

There is a general prohibition on the use of sexual history evidence by the defence in sex offence trials. There are very limited circumstances in which the law allows such evidence to be introduced, but crucially section 41 prevents the use of sexual history by the defence to discredit the complainant. The defence must make an application to the court to introduce evidence or questions of a complainant's sexual history, which is then decided upon by the judge in that case.

The Government want to be sure that the law is working as it should, and strikes the right balance between protecting complainants and ensuring the defendant's right to a fair trial. That is why we have undertaken a study to look at how the law in this area is working in practice.

Earlier this year, the then Lord Chancellor and I asked the Crown Prosecution Service to undertake an analysis of rape cases finalised in 2016 to determine the frequency and outcome of applications, under section 41.

This study looked at 309 such cases and found that in 92% of them—the overwhelming majority—no evidence of the complainant's sexual history was introduced by the defence. Additionally, applications to introduce such evidence were only made in 13% of these cases. These findings strongly indicate that the law is working as it should, and strikes a careful balance between the need to protect complainants and ensuring that defendants receive a fair trial, consistent with the common law and Article 6 of the European convention on human rights.

Whilst this is reassuring, we want to do more to provide vulnerable victims—and the public at large—with complete confidence in our criminal justice system. The Government are committed to ensuring that victims are treated with dignity and fairness in court. We are therefore taking additional steps to ensure the law continues to function effectively. These steps include the launch of new mandatory CPS prosecutor training and updated legal guidance; discussing with representatives of the Bar and solicitors the opportunity to improve training for criminal practitioners on section 41; a review by the Criminal Procedure Rule Committee of their rules in this area; and improved data collection.

Throughout this study we have listened to the views of victims' groups and stakeholders, and engaged with them on raising awareness of section 41 and ensuring its effective operation. We will continue to engage with them on this issue.

Further details of the study are set out in a report that accompanies this statement. The measures we are taking are in addition to our wider work to support victims and witnesses in sexual offences cases. This wider work includes the roll-out of pre-recorded cross-examination for vulnerable witnesses in sexual offence cases, the introduction of new guidance for independent sexual violence advisers, and our commitment to publish a victims' strategy in early 2018. The Government have also committed to publish a draft Domestic Violence and Abuse Bill and provide an additional £20 million to provide support to victims and to organisations combating domestic abuse.

Copies of the report have been laid before both Houses and the full report is available here:

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/limiting-the-use-of-complainants-sexual-history-in-sexual-offence-cases](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/limiting-the-use-of-complainants-sexual-history-in-sexual-offence-cases)

[HCWS349]

## CABINET OFFICE

### Government Accountability and Transparency

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore):** Since 2010, the Government have been at the forefront of opening up data to allow Parliament, the public and the media to hold public bodies to account. Such online transparency is crucial accountability for delivering the best value for money, to cutting waste and inefficiency, and to ensuring every pound of taxpayers' money is spent in the best possible way. Indeed, such data has allowed those working within central and local government to identify savings and stop excessive spending they did not otherwise know about.

The sunlight of transparency also acts in itself as an important check and balance, and helps ensure the highest standards of public life amongst elected representatives and officials. Alongside this, open data has great potential to deliver better public services through innovative uses of digital and mobile technology.

This moves away from more bureaucratic processes under previous Administrations, such as Public Service Agreements, Departmental Strategic Objectives and Comprehensive Performance Assessments, which were time consuming for public servants and opaque to the outside world.

#### *Open data and transparency*

Today a new webpage will go live on gov.uk that will, for the first time, bring together in one place a comprehensive list of the core transparency data published by all Government Departments, alongside details on how that data is prepared.

We have published new guidelines that clarify not only what core transparency data will be published by central Government and how frequently; but also how we will ensure it is available in the most usable format and is easy to find.

This new landing page and publication guidance will help people find and navigate the information they need more easily and reaffirms our commitment to continue to drive forward the transparency agenda.

This guidance represents the minimum requirements which are common to all central Government Departments: many Departments can and do go further.

#### *Single Departmental plans*

We are also publishing today a refreshed set of single Departmental plans across Government. These set out each Government Department's objectives and how they will achieve them. Taken together, they show how departments are working to deliver the Government's programme.

Single Departmental plans are important tools for transparency and accountability. They allow the public to track the Government's progress and performance against a number of indicators. They also indicate which Ministers and senior officials are responsible for delivering each objective.

#### *Ministerial accountability*

Under the terms of the Ministerial Code, Ministers must ensure that no conflict arises or could reasonably be perceived to arise between their Ministerial position and their private interests.

Today we are publishing an updated list of Ministers' interests which captures those interests relevant to Ministers' responsibilities; it should be read alongside the two Parliamentary registers.

We are also publishing an update report on "the handling of Ministers' interest" from Sir Alex Allan, the Prime Minister's independent adviser on Ministers' interests, alongside an updated list of Ministerial responsibilities and the regular quarterly disclosure of Ministers' gifts, hospitality, overseas travel and meetings with external organisations.

The Government are also publishing agendas and the meeting notes of the first two meetings of the Co-ordination Committee between the Government and the DUP, as well as the terms of reference.

#### *Diversity in public appointments*

The Cabinet Office is also today publishing an action plan for improving the diversity of public appointments. Getting the balance right when making public appointments is a key part of ensuring we have public services which understand and respond to the needs of the population they serve.

In 2013, Government set an aspiration that 50% of new public appointments made each year should go to women. Good progress has been made—49% new appointments made in 2016-17 went to women.

However, up until now we have had very little data on the make-up of existing bodies. This report sets out the record of each department, and the steps we are taking to ensure public bodies accurately reflect the diversity of 21st Century Britain with a new strategy and new aspirations for increasing diversity in public appointments.

#### *Transparency of senior officials and special advisers*

Special advisers are a critical part of the team supporting Ministers. They add a political dimension to the advice and assistance available to Ministers while reinforcing the impartiality of the permanent Civil Service by

distinguishing the source of political advice and support. The Cabinet Office are today publishing the annual list of special advisers and their cost.

Special advisers are temporary civil servants. They represent 0.05% of the Civil Service pay bill. There are 88 special advisers across the whole of Government; the total Civil Service has 423,000 civil servants.

Departments are also publishing routine quarterly data on gifts and hospitality, received by special advisers, as well as information on meetings with senior media figures.

Alongside quarterly data on the travel and expenses of senior officials, the Government are also publishing today the transparency returns on senior public sector pay, as well as updated guidance on the controls for remuneration of senior civil servants and ministerial appointments to public bodies.

The Government will also shortly be publishing new figures on gender pay differentials across the Civil Service.

Copies of the associate documents are being placed in the Library of the House and will be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS352]

## COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### Grenfell Tower

**The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid):** Today marks six months since the Grenfell Tower tragedy and I am sure I speak for the whole House when I say our thoughts very much remain with those affected.

A national memorial service will take place at St Paul's Cathedral today to mark this, which the Prime Minister, ministerial colleagues and I will attend. This will provide the opportunity for us to remember those who tragically lost their lives and I hope offer some comfort to the bereaved and survivors. I am determined those who lost their lives, their families and friends, the survivors and the community will not be forgotten and are supported in getting the help they need and deserve.

On 11 December I wrote to all colleagues with an update on some of the work being undertaken to support those affected and I plan, with Mr Speaker's permission, to make an oral statement to the House before recess.

Above all, I am determined that the lessons of the Grenfell fire are learnt and never forgotten so that a tragedy like this can never, ever happen again.

[HCWS346]

## DEFENCE

### Grant-in-kind: Jordanian Armed Forces

**The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson):** I have today laid before the House a Departmental Minute describing a package of equipment that the UK intends to provide to the Jordanian Armed Forces. The value of the package is estimated at £2,562,500.

The provision of equipment will be treated as a grant-in-kind. Following correspondence from the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee in 2016, Departments

which previously treated these payments as gifts have undertaken to notify the House of Commons of any such grant-in-kind of a value exceeding £300,000 and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from making the grant until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the Minute, except in cases of special urgency.

The grant-in-kind in this case comprises vehicles, furniture and IT equipment, generators and a range of personal-issue items. The granting of this equipment will support the Jordanian Defence & Borders programme and is fundamental to the aims of the Government strategy for Jordan. Delivery of targeted areas of equipment support is an integral part of the approach in order to assist Jordan in developing the capability to protect its borders. The activity is in support of the National Security Council objectives and is funded through the conflict, security and stability fund administered by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence.

Subject to completion of the Departmental Minute process, the equipment is expected to be delivered in early 2018.

[HCWS348]

### Single Source Procurement Legislation

#### **The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson):**

Section 37 of the Defence Reform Act (2014) requires me to carry out a review of the single source procurement legislation (the DRA and the Single Source Contract Regulations 2014) within three years of it coming into force on 18 December 2014. In meeting this obligation, I would like to express my appreciation for the work and support provided by the Single Source Regulations Office (SSRO) which undertook an extensive consultation process with stakeholders from mid-2016 onwards. I have had regard to the recommendations on changes to the legislation provided by the SSRO in June 2017.

Following further engagement with the SSRO and industry, my review of the legislation has now been completed. It identified a number of areas where changes to the legislation could improve the operation of the regime. Further work will now be needed on the detail of how these could be implemented. In particular, we will need to assure ourselves that the changes result in the intended benefits without imposing unnecessary additional burdens on the Ministry of Defence or suppliers, and that the benefits justify the use of Parliament's time. I will make a further statement on this in early 2018.

[HCWS351]

### Air Cadet Aerospace Offer

#### **The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood):**

A review of gliding and developments within the Royal Air Force (RAF) Air Cadets suggests that a revised Air Cadet Aerospace Offer is overdue. The RAF Air Cadets, in 2017 and beyond, are offering more comprehensive training opportunities to complement cadet gliding and flying that, in light of the broader use of digital technologies, ensure the Air Cadet Offer is looking to the future.

The RAF Air Cadets continue to offer a wide range of excellent activities and opportunities to young people to broaden their experience, improve their confidence and equip them with the skills to succeed, both professionally and personally. Previously, the "Air" in Air Cadet has largely been associated with gliding, flying scholarship and air experience activity. In 2017—and as we look to the future—this places insufficient recognition on broader aviation activities offered alongside flying, with cadets being trained in a number of associated aerospace subjects, which offer the possibility of achieving recognised qualifications or contributing to a CV. In line with wider RAF transformation, we are also considering further cadet learning in emerging areas and technologies such as:

Remote—piloting;

Space—with potential linkages to the National Space Centre; and

Through links to the RAF 100 legacy "Trenchard Group", which seeks to transform our training and education offer: aerospace control, artificial intelligence and augmented reality.

We are modernising to provide wider aerospace and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) experience and qualifications that benefit both cadets and industry in emerging aerospace technology areas. Furthermore there is industry interest in providing aerospace experience shown through linkages with cadets at the Royal International Air Tattoo and Syerston Aerospace camps.

The current generation of cadets and volunteer staff view this positively. It follows that gliding will, in future, be just one part of a useful array of qualifications and experience available to cadets in the aerospace field.

To broaden cadets' perspectives, a National Aerospace Camp took place in August 2017, following the success of the two previous camps in 2015 and 2016. This brought together over 200 cadets from every corner of the United Kingdom to provide a tailored training programme, focusing on aerospace, aviation, engineering and flying. Alongside many visits to specialist and unique MOD, RAF and aviation establishments; cadets were involved in training in remote-control helicopter flying, radio, synthetic simulator training and air traffic control.

The RAF Air Cadets are in collaboration with the Aviation Skills Partnership, to provide pathways into the aerospace sector. A national hub will be created for the RAF Air Cadets and their adult volunteers, as part of the RAF100 legacy, to engage with modern learning, upskilling, accreditation and development through aerospace subjects. The Aaron Aerospace Academy will be built at RAF Syerston and is intended to form part of a national network of aerospace academies, in the coming years, with state of the art facilities.

Throughout the financial year 2016/17 a total of 17,600 cadets had powered flying experiences in the Grob Tutor, with additional opportunities expected as part of a new Air Experience Flight based in Northern Ireland. A further 2,000 have flown in front-line aircraft during training sorties. Tutor flying is now better integrated as part of the wider training programme as, since the gliding relaunch, the utilisation of Part Task Trainer (PTT) simulators has been realigned, with simulated gliding training a pre-cursor to both gliding and Tutor powered flying qualifications. Each Volunteer Gliding School (VGS) now incorporates at least one PTT and,

in addition, five Aerospace Ground Schools equipped with PTTs have been established in locations where full VGS' were previously closed.

Glider recovery rates are now steady and predictable, allowing a total of nearly 3,000 glider sorties to be conducted since recovery of the fleet began. 22 Viking gliders have been recovered so far and gliders have been assigned to Syerston, Little Rissington, Upavon and Tern Hill. Current plans are that up to 15 Vigilant gliders will be delivered, of which six have been recovered so far, with two having been assigned to Topcliffe and the remainder operating at Syerston.

These VGS units are now starting to offer wings courses, as they did prior to the pause in flying. More VGS will be regenerated in the coming months.

The review identified that a smaller fleet can be effectively used to potentially improve availability and extend the service life of the gliders. Accordingly, the recovery plans, focusing on contractor capacity and value for money, will now deliver up to 60 Viking gliders, rather than the 73 previously anticipated. As such the revised numbers will deliver the required output—that of giving Air Cadets the opportunity of gaining gliding experience as part of the wider aerospace offer—and will not impact the number of VGS squadrons agreed in March 2016, or the size of the Volunteer Instructor cadre required to support it.

A modern Air Cadet Aerospace Offer should focus on achieving an appropriate balance of gliding, flying, simulation, STEM and front line air experience, making best use of the assets that the RAF have to offer, whilst also looking to the future. The RAF remains extremely grateful for the hard work, time and energy of the volunteers that support the Air Cadets in driving forward this transformation of the Air Cadet Aerospace Offer.

[HCWS350]

## EDUCATION

### Schools and Colleges: Advice and Guidance

**The Minister for Children and Families (Mr Robert Goodwill):** Today the Government are launching a public consultation on proposed changes to its Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) statutory guidance. All schools and colleges in England must have regard to this guidance when carrying out their duties to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

KCSIE sets out the legal duties that schools and colleges must comply with, together with good practice guidance on what schools and colleges should do in order to keep children safe. The guidance is extensive, covering what staff should know and do to safeguard children, the management of safeguarding in schools and colleges, safer recruitment and responding to allegations of abuse against staff.

It is important that this guidance is regularly updated to reflect current concerns and best practice. KCSIE was last updated in September 2016 and the time is right to update this guidance again. The consultation document explains a number of proposed changes to KCSIE. The aim is to help schools and colleges better

understand what they are required to do by law and what we strongly advise they should do in order to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

The consultation will last for 10 weeks, closing on 22 February 2018. Following the public consultation, we expect to publish revised guidance, for information, early in the summer term 2018 and for this to come into force in September 2018, at the start of the new school year.

The proposed changes include providing further guidance on sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges. As well as consulting on these changes the Government are also today publishing a more detailed Departmental advice on this issue.

Children and young people must be protected from sexual violence and sexual harassment, and schools and colleges are under a legal duty to safeguard their pupils.

The detailed advice we have published today should help schools and colleges take swift and proportionate action to keep children safe and support victims of abuse.

The advice sets out what sexual violence and sexual harassment look like, the legal responsibilities of schools and colleges and effective safeguarding practice and principles to support schools and colleges in their decision making process when there is a report of sexual violence or sexual harassment.

The issue of sexual violence and sexual harassment in schools was the subject of an inquiry by the Women and Equalities Committee. As part of its response to the Committee's recommendations, the Department for Education set up an advisory group to review existing Departmental guidance, including KCSIE and behaviour and bullying guidance. The Department has worked with the advisory group and other expert stakeholders to draft the advice document and is grateful to them for their contributions.

The consultation document, containing full details of the proposals and inviting responses and the Departmental advice can be accessed via [gov.uk](http://gov.uk). Copies of the consultation document and Departmental advice will also be placed in the House Libraries.

[HCWS354]

### Social Mobility: Education

**The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening):** Today, 14 December 2017, I am publishing "Unlocking Talent; Fulfilling Potential: A plan for improving social mobility through education".

This is an ambitious plan to put social mobility at the heart of education policy, helping to make Britain fit for the future. It sits alongside the work of other Departments, and brings together a coherent, concerted approach to begin to level up opportunity right across the education system.

Our education reforms are raising standards in schools: compared to 2010 there are now 1.9 million more pupils in good and outstanding schools. Our introduction of a central focus on phonics is transforming literacy rates for young children. There are record numbers of young people in education or training and more disadvantaged young people going to university.

But, in our country today, where you start still all too often determines where you finish. And while talent is spread evenly across the country, opportunity is not. If we are to make this a country that truly works for everyone, there is much more to be done to deliver equality of opportunity for every child, regardless of who they are or where they live.

We are under no illusion that this will be easy. Nor that education can do it alone. But it does play a vital role—equality of opportunity starts with education.

This plan will deliver action targeted towards the people and the places where it is needed most through five key ambitions. Firstly, there is an overarching ambition to provide additional support to parts of the country that need it to ensure no community is “left behind”. Then there are four life stage ambitions:

*Ambition 1: Close the word gap in the early years:* children with strong foundations start school in a position to progress, but too many children fall behind early. We need to tackle development gaps, especially key early language and literacy skills, including by boosting investment in English hubs and professional development for early years professionals.

*Ambition 2: Close the attainment gap in school while continuing to raise standards for all:* the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers is closing. But these pupils still remain behind their peers. We will build on recent reforms, and raise standards in the areas that need it most. This will include more support for teachers early in their careers, providing clear pathways to progression, and getting more great teachers in areas where there remain significant challenges.

*Ambition 3: High-quality post-16 education choices for all young people:* we have more people going to university than ever before, including more disadvantaged young people, but we need to expand access further to the best universities. We are delivering a skills revolution including working with business to make technical education world class, backed by an extra £500 million investment at the March 2017 Budget.

*Ambition 4: Everyone achieving their full potential in rewarding careers:* employment has grown, but we need to improve access for young people from lower-income backgrounds to networks of advice, information and experiences of work through a new type of partnership with businesses and employers. We will also support adults to retrain/upskill.

To achieve these ambitions, we are shifting the way we work. We are focusing on what works: putting evidence at the heart of our approach, embedding and extending successful reforms, and spreading best practice.

We are also shifting focus on building lasting success through partnership: asking employers, education professionals, voluntary groups and many others to step up and join a united effort across the country to put social mobility at the heart of their work too.

Improving opportunity for the next generation of young people is one of the great challenges of our time; everyone must play their part. But the prize is huge: a country in which talent and potential are what matters more. A country where everyone can be at their best.

The plan will be published on the Department for Education’s website and copies will also be placed in the House Libraries.

Unlocking Talent; Fulfilling Potential (Social Mobility Action Plan.pdf) plan can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statements/commons-today/>

## FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

### Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council

**The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan):** My hon. Friend the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon) has made the following written statement:

On Tuesday 28 and Wednesday 29 November, I chaired the sixth meeting of the Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council in London. The council was attended by elected leaders and representatives from Anguilla, Ascension Island, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Montserrat, Pitcairn, St Helena, the Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia, Tristan da Cunha and the Turks and Caicos Islands.

The key themes discussed at this year’s Council included post-hurricane reconstruction and recovery in the overseas territories; environment and climate change; the implications for the overseas territories of the UK’s decision to leave the European Union; developing tangible change for the overseas territories and their citizens; anti-corruption, beneficial ownership and tax transparency; governance, human rights and child safeguarding; and health. Ministerial colleagues from the Departments for International Development, Exiting the European Union, Health, Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and Her Majesty’s Treasury attended the discussions. Territory leaders also met the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for International Development. I held bilateral meetings with Territory leaders. The Minister of State for Europe and the Americas (The right hon. Sir Alan Duncan MP) met Members of the Falklands Islands Legislative Assembly.

The Council agreed a communiqué which identified priorities and set out a number of important commitments and areas for joint work in the year ahead. On the important subject of disaster recovery, the UK reiterated its commitment to work in partnership with the Governments of the territories affected by Hurricanes Irma and Maria. We welcomed the additional £15 million of UK support for early recovery in addition to the £62 million investment in relief so far; and the Prime Minister’s announcement on 28 November of a further £70 million in grants and up to £300 million of loan guarantees to support long-term reconstruction in the worst-affected territories. We discussed the private sector’s important role in driving economic recovery, and the need for the overseas territories to have disaster preparedness policies in place that are fit for purpose.

We continued our dialogue on the implications for the overseas territories of Brexit, and reiterated our objective to achieve a deal in the negotiations that works for all parts of the UK family. We will seek to ensure the security and economic sustainability of the overseas territories is preserved and, where possible, strengthened post Brexit. We welcomed the progress made by those overseas territories with financial centres to implement the bilateral arrangements for law enforcement exchange of beneficial ownership information, and committed to review the effectiveness of the first six months of their operation. We also welcomed the overseas territories’ co-operation in international efforts to promote tax transparency and tackle financial crime, as well as their constructive engagement with the EU Code of Conduct Group and the Global Forum for Asset Recovery. We reiterated our commitment to show leadership in tackling corruption.

The communiqué reflects the commitment of the Governments of the overseas territories and the UK to continue to work in partnership to achieve the vision set out in the June 2012 White Paper: *The Overseas Territories: Security, Success and Sustainability*.

In line with our commitment in the White Paper, we will continue to report to Parliament on progress by Government Departments in implementing the commitments in the communiqué.

A copy of the communiqué has been published on the GOV.UK website.

I have arranged for the communiqué to be placed in the House Library.

The Joint Ministerial Council 2017 Communiqué can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-12-14/HCWS355/>.

[HCWS355]

## HEALTH

### Health and Care Workforce Strategy

**The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne):** I wish to update Parliament that on 13 December 2017, Health Education England published the consultation “Facing the Facts, Shaping the Future”, a draft health and care workforce strategy for England to 2027.

This draft strategy is for consultation with stakeholders and the public more widely and is the product of the whole national health system, including NHS England, NHS Improvement and Public Health England.

It announces system-wide reviews to assess the impact of technological changes on clinical professionals and on how best to support the informal workforce—made up of family, friends, carers and patients themselves—in the future.

Further information on the consultation and how to participate can be found at: <https://www.hee.nhs.uk/our-work/planning-commissioning/workforce-strategy>.

A copy of the draft strategy can be found at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-12-14/HCWS345/>

[HCWS345]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Justice and Home Affairs Council

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd):** The EU Justice and Home Affairs Council of Ministers met on 7 and 8 December in Brussels. I represented the UK for Interior Day. The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, represented the UK for Justice Day.

On Interior Day (7 December) a General Approach was agreed on the proposed EU-LISA regulation. The Government have opted into the draft regulation and is content with the text. I abstained on the vote due to a Parliamentary Scrutiny Reserve.

The next item was a progress report on improving interoperability of EU information systems, following the recommendations made by a High-Level Expert Group in June. The Commission previewed legislation to be proposed next week, which will include the creation of a single “hit-no-hit” search interface. In general terms, the UK supports efforts to improve interoperability of EU systems, but we will scrutinise these proposals in further detail when they are released.

Ministers then exchanged views on the interim report and recommendations of the High-Level Expert Group On Radicalisation (HLEG-R). I intervened to share UK learning following the 2017 attacks, including the importance of working with local communities as highlighted in the newly published Anderson report. I voiced support for proposed new Commission structures, suggesting benefit in a research function and an EU wide strategic communications network.

The non-EU Counter Terrorism Group (CTG) followed with a presentation to the council, in which they covered their assessment of the terrorism threat in the EU, and set out in further detail their plans for future counter terrorism co-operation including with Europol. I intervened to support the ongoing CTG activities in this space.

This was followed by a discussion on co-operation between Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operations and EU JHA agencies. This centred around lessons to be learned from existing co-operation between JHA agencies and EU security and defence missions in third countries, with Operation Sophia (tackling migrant traffickers in the Central Mediterranean) the focus. Work is continuing to implement the lessons learned and improve co-operation.

The Commission then gave an update on the state of play on transposition and implementation of the Directive on the use of Passenger Name Record (PNR) data. The Commission noted that not all member states were on track to meet the implementation deadline. The UK has the most developed capacity for processing PNR data in Europe and will continue to offer advice and support to member states in the development of their own capabilities.

This was followed by a short presentation from the Bulgarian delegation on the work programme for their upcoming presidency. The overarching aim of their presidency is to preserve unity and solidarity within the EU, noting that they will prioritise security-related issues, especially those relating to data, during their presidency.

The presidency then gave a progress update on negotiations of legislative proposals on the reform of the Common European Asylum System. The Commission noted their ambition to adopt EU Asylum Agency and Eurodac legislation by March 2018.

The working lunch discussed strengthening of the Schengen area. Ministers had a detailed discussion on how to improve Schengen border management, including through the proposed Schengen borders legislative package. The UK does not participate in the Schengen border free zone and I did not intervene in this discussion.

Following lunch, the presidency presented views on restricted data retention and targeted data access. The discussion focused on the need for a common approach, whilst taking account of the importance of data retention to law enforcement agencies. I intervened to update the council on the principles of the UK response to the

Court of Justice of the European Union judgment in the TELE2 / Watson case from December 2016, as set out in our consultation, launched on 30 November, on new safeguards for the use of communications data.

The Commission also provided an update on its proposals for technical measures to help law enforcement address issues related to encrypted data, which was followed by a short discussion on best practice in this area. I intervened to encourage closer engagement with service providers, and the need to press industry to find technical solutions.

Interior day ended with the council receiving updates on the outcomes of the EU Internet Forum meeting on 6 December, and the presidency's review of the JHA strategic guidelines. The Swiss delegation also gave an update on the third meeting of the central Mediterranean Group, which took place in Bern on 13 November.

Justice day (8 December) began with agreement by Ministers to a General Approach on the European Criminal Records Information System (ECRIS) Directive and the regulation regarding exchange of information on third country nationals (ECRIS-TCN). During a discussion on fingerprint thresholds, the Secretary of State for Justice intervened to indicate that the UK can accept the position reached, but also to express regret that the agreed text was not more ambitious, supporting the review clause in the text. While the UK can support the General Approach, as the proposals had not cleared Parliamentary Scrutiny, Secretary of State for Justice abstained on the vote.

A General Approach was then also agreed on the proposed Regulation on mutual recognition of freezing and confiscation orders. Despite some disagreement between member states on whether this should take the form of a Regulation or a Directive, this was passed by a qualified majority. The proposal had not cleared Parliamentary Scrutiny.

This was followed by a discussion on the recast of the Brussels Ila Regulation, in which Ministers agreed to abolish exequatur for all decision in matters of parental responsibility, whilst retaining sufficient safeguards to ensure the best interests of the child and the right of defence were preserved. The Secretary of State for Justice highlighted the benefits for citizens and families that the change would bring in reducing time, cost and complexity for those in often difficult personal circumstances.

At lunch, there was a discussion about the next e-Justice Strategy and Action Plan.

The presidency then introduced a paper on the insolvency, restructuring and second chance Directive, setting out political guidelines on three issues; there was broad support for an optional viability test and general support for a mechanism to govern creditor voting rights. Member states were largely split on a proposed three year discharge period. The UK emphasised the potential benefit here for European economies and supported all three guidelines.

The Commission set out that it would continue to work towards an agreement for the EU to accede to the European Court of human rights, taking into account the concerns of the Court of Justice of the European Union, which had found the previous draft accession

agreement contrary to the EU Treaties. The Commission gave no indication of a likely timescale, and noted that the issues raised by the Court were politically and legally complex to resolve.

[HCWS353]

## WORK AND PENSIONS

### Employment and Support Allowance

**The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr David Gauke):** In 2013, the Department was made aware of individual cases which were transferred in error to contributory ESA, rather than to income-related ESA, and therefore which may have had an unidentified entitlement to additional premiums, such as the enhanced disability premium. These premiums are only payable to those on income-related benefits. From 2014 additional guidance was put in place to ensure all claims transitioning from that point forward were more fully assessed for both contributory and income-related benefits, and therefore the relevant premiums paid.

At the time officials did not identify the need to explore the potential impact of the earlier error. This was reconsidered in the light of analysis following the preliminary fraud and error statistics published in May 2016. In February 2017, Ministers were first informed of the results of this analysis and a sampling exercise began in preparation for a full repayment process. The Department has already started contacting individuals to establish if there has been an underpayment of premiums. A small number of claims have already been corrected and the appropriate arrears have been paid.

As a result of the sampling exercise, the Department estimates that around 75,000 claimants may have been underpaid. This amounts to about 5% of those people who transferred over from incapacity benefits, or around 3% of the current ESA caseload.

We realise how important it is to get this matter fixed. The Department has established a special team to begin contacting all individuals whom we believe may be affected. There is therefore no need for individuals to independently contact the Department on this matter. Once an individual is contacted and subject to establishing the relevant information, we expect to make a decision on each case and repay the appropriate arrears within 12 weeks. The Department expect to complete the review and correct cases during the course of 2018/19.

This relates to a specific group that transferred to contributory ESA between 2011 and 2014, for which applicable underpayments will now be corrected and paid. Arrears are payable to those who qualify from 21 October 2014 following an upper tier tribunal ruling in the case of *LH v. SSWP* on that date. Under section 27 of the Social Security Act 1998, when a tribunal establishes the meaning of a legislative provision, payments of arrears which pre-date the tribunal ruling are barred.

The Department is reviewing its processes to ensure any lessons are learnt and that this error is avoided in the future.

[HCWS356]



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