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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Tuesday 27 February 2018

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Local Authority Funding

1. **Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on trends in the level of funding for local authorities since 2010. [904028]

2. **Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on trends in the level of funding for local authorities since 2010. [904029]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): It is right that more of our money that is spent locally is raised locally. In 2010, councils were 80% dependent on Government grants. By 2020, they will largely be funded by council tax and other local revenues.

Rushanara Ali: Local councils have faced devastating cuts. The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that, between 2010 and 2020, councils will have had their direct funding cut by 79%. In Tower Hamlets, we have lost £138 million through budget cuts since 2010. With one of the Conservative party's own councils going bust, will the Minister now finally commit to funding local authorities properly, so that they can provide vital services to their communities?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have pointed out, it is right that we rebalance council spending from central Government grants to locally raised taxes, to help to keep councils accountable. We have seen councils up and down the country finding innovative ways of working, such as sharing back-office services and doing things such as installing wi-fi and improving waste collection. We have also seen Labour councils wasting money. For example, Momentum-supported Birmingham City Council bin strikes have cost the taxpayer £40,000 a day, and Reading—

Mr Speaker: Order. Resume your seat, Minister. That is the end of it. You answer for Government policy. You do not waste the time of the House by launching into

rants about the policies of other parties. I have made my point, and if the Chancellor is confused about it, he really is under-informed and I say to him: stick to your abacus, man.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: My own council of Brighton and Hove has had to make £52 million-worth of cuts in three years, despite superb Labour leadership in the city. With one of the Minister's own Tory councils going bust, will the Chancellor finally commit to properly funding local government in tomorrow's local government finance settlement?

Elizabeth Truss: We have provided local councils with council tax flexibilities to enable them to fund spending in their areas. It is absolutely right that councils should not waste money and should find savings. The fact is that we went through an incredibly profligate period under Labour in which the Government were running record deficits, and we have succeeded in reducing the deficit by three quarters. I must also point out to the hon. Gentleman that councils have reserves of £23 billion. In fact, those reserves have increased by £8 billion since 2010.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): In Cumbria, the Labour council leaders failed to reach a devolution settlement with the Government that would have brought in additional resource. Does the Minister agree, however, that this is not just about resource and that it is also about council structures, leadership and creating efficient organisations?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Lots of councils have done things better and more efficiently, and have led the way across government. We have given more powers to local Mayors, and we are giving Mayors across the country £4.8 billion of new investment over the next 30 years.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What priority does my right hon. Friend attach to local authorities building new housing?

Elizabeth Truss: It is vital that we see more housing built across the country, and that is why in the Budget we committed to 300,000 homes a year being built over the next decade.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury join me in paying tribute to Kent County Council, which has managed to make substantial savings and efficiencies since 2010, while continuing to provide excellent services?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have seen the leadership of numerous Conservative councils across the country in finding new and efficient ways of doing things. That is what we need to do as a Government. We need to find better ways of doing things and more efficiency, rather than wasting money and crashing the economy, as happened under the previous Labour Government.

23. [904050] **Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab): My county council of Derbyshire has seen its Government funding cut by over £200 million, and two thirds of its spending

goes on adult social care. Does the Minister think that a postcode lottery of which counties can afford the most council tax should determine whether their elderly get looked after decently?

Elizabeth Truss: We have put additional funding into social care, and we have also allowed councils to raise the precept, but it is a very important principle that local councils are accountable to local voters for the money they spend. The situation we inherited in 2010, when 80% of the money came from the Government, meant we could have profligate local councils and local taxpayers would not have to foot the bill.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): This week, having faced the same central Government cuts as everyone else, Conservative-controlled Kettering Borough Council, of which I am a member, can be expected to freeze its council tax for the eighth year in a row. Does it therefore appear that some councils are better at managing their affairs than others?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I note that council tax doubled under the previous Labour Government, and we are hearing talk from the Opposition that there might be another rise if they were to get into government again.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The issue of public sector pay is inextricably linked to the level of funding provided to both local authorities and other public bodies. Will the Chief Secretary commit to lifting the public sector pay cap across the board and to properly funding these pay increases?

Elizabeth Truss: We put an extra £2 billion of spending power into the hands of the Scottish Government at the last Budget, and we have also said that we want to be flexible over public sector pay to make sure we are retaining and recruiting the best possible staff.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): First, if you will forgive me, Mr Speaker, as we came into the Chamber we heard the news of the death of Simeon Andrews, who co-ordinated a large number of all-party groups and trade union groups, and, if we can, I would like us to send our sympathies to his family on behalf of the House.

The ministerial responses we have heard demonstrate absolutely no understanding whatsoever of the crisis created by the cuts of the past eight years and their impact on local government. Local councils are now facing a funding gap of nearly £6 billion by 2020, and it is the most vulnerable in our society who are suffering. The number of children taken into care is at its highest level since 1985, and one in three councillors are warning that the cuts have left them with insufficient resources to support these children. The leader of the Chancellor's own Surrey council said:

"The Government cannot stand idly by when Rome burns."

Will the Chief Secretary commit today to use the opportunity of next month's spring statement to address the funding crisis in our local councils?

Elizabeth Truss: First, the spring statement is not a fiscal event, and it is vital that we maintain the discipline that we have achieved over the past eight years and keep control of public spending, because that is what has led

to the strong economy we are now seeing, with record levels of employment and an increasing number of new businesses starting up. The reality is that if Labour were to get into power, that legacy would be squandered.

Local government will see a 2.1% increase in cash terms between 2015 and 2019, and, as I have pointed out, they have also seen an increase in local council reserves of £8 billion—money available to spend on, and invest in, local services.

John McDonnell: With the crisis in children's services, to be frank this is not the time for political knockabout responses. I am not sure whether the Chief Secretary has witnessed a child being taken into care; I have, and it can scar that child for life. But do not listen to me; listen to the all-party inquiry into children's social care, which warned that nine out of 10 councils are struggling to meet their legal duties to children. The president of the Association of Directors of Children's Services has said:

"We cannot go on as we are",

and it is reported that over half the councils in England are planning further cuts to children's services.

Recent estimates of Government spending and income show that the Chancellor will have sufficient resources to protect our children from further cuts. So I appeal—once again—to the Chancellor to use the flexibility he has to use the spring statement to address the £2 billion funding gap in our children's services, to protect our children.

Elizabeth Truss: It is a bit rich of the right hon. Gentleman to suggest that we should not bring politics into this when that is precisely what he is doing. We are making sure that local councils have the flexibility to raise council tax to fund these vital public services. Labour has to acknowledge that this is not just about the money we spend but the way we spend it. The reality is that if the entire focus is on the level of spending rather than what we are doing, we end up with the situation that occurred in 2010—vast increases in spending and services actually getting worse.

PFI Contracts and Carillion

3. **Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab):** Whether he has reviewed his Department's procedures for authorising and monitoring private finance initiative contracts as a result of the liquidation of Carillion. [904030]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman knows this, but just to put it in context, the vast majority of all current PFI projects—86%—were signed under the previous Labour Government. Since coming into office in 2010, this Government have reformed the approach, so that now PF2 contracts deliver better value for money for taxpayers. The performance of PFI contracts, including those where Carillion is involved, are monitored by the procuring authorities. New PF2 contracts will be subject to a rigorous value for money assessment. There are currently no PF2 projects in procurement.

Graham P. Jones: I am concerned about the workers. Apparently, 90% of Carillion's private sector contractors have suggested that they will continue to pay staff, but only in the interim period. What about the 10% who are

not going to be paid, and what is going to happen to the staff after the interim period? Are the Government going to guarantee the employment status and pay of those individuals?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Gentleman may be slightly confusing PFI contracts with outsourcing contracts that do not involve capital structures. The resolution of Carillion continues. So far, there has been a very high rate of uptake by private clients of Carillion to continue the services that are being delivered, and we have high hopes of protecting the vast majority of the jobs involved.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What are the Government doing to improve transparency in public-private partnerships?

Mr Hammond: We absolutely value transparency in the public-private partnerships that are delivered. They are an important part of the overall infrastructure. As I just explained to the House, there are currently no PF2 projects in procurement. That indicates that we have set the bar for value for money in public-private partnerships very high, and we will continue to do so.

Mr Speaker: Order. This is a rather extraordinary state of affairs. I hope that the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones) is not indisposed, and if he is I am sorry, but otherwise there is absolutely no basis for his leaving the Chamber during the exchanges on his question. That is a rank discourtesy to the House—and a discourtesy to the Chancellor as well, for that matter. It must not happen.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): The shadow Chancellor recently wrote to the Chancellor asking when he will produce revised value for money guidance, as highlighted by the National Audit Office; an updated list of PFIs, as existing data is nearly two years old; and details of any assessment the Treasury carried out on Carillion's readiness to fulfil its PFI contracts. When will we get them?

Mr Hammond: I have not yet received a letter from the shadow Chancellor, but if he has written to me, I shall of course reply to him and answer his questions.

Road and Rail Investment

4. **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): What recent assessment the Government have made of the effect of the national productivity investment fund on road and rail infrastructure in the north-west. [904031]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): This Government have put raising our national productivity at the heart of our mission. From the national productivity investment fund, we have already announced over £50 million of investment in road and rail in the north-west, and this is in addition to the transforming cities allocations to Manchester of £243 million and to Liverpool of £135 million.

Damien Moore: Does my hon. Friend agree that the £31 billion national productivity investment fund, targeted at transport, digital communications, research and development and housing, will boost the infrastructure of the UK economy?

Robert Jenrick: The latest statistics show that we have had the best run of productivity growth since before the financial crisis, but we are certainly not complacent. The national productivity investment fund is improving passenger journeys, our roads and our broadband connections and delivering more homes, all of which are key to raising the wages and living standards of people in Southport and across the country.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The problem is that the national productivity investment fund is not doing anything to stop the disrepair on our roads and motorways. The Government are simply not putting in enough money for local councils and the national agency to make sure that repairs on motorways and local roads are brought up to standard. We now have a greater crisis than we have seen for some time.

Robert Jenrick: I am afraid that I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's analysis. The Government have put a record amount of investment into our roads and rail. As the Chancellor announced in the autumn, there is further money for transport projects in the north. There is £13 billion in total to improve transport across the north of England.

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I do not think the hon. Gentleman represents a north-west constituency.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): This Government have done nothing to deliver local rail infrastructure in the north-west, which is vital for jobs and the economy. When are they going to invest in decent local rail services, including those used by my constituents from Southport to Manchester? If the Government will not do it, they should stand aside and let us get on with the job.

Robert Jenrick: The Government have been investing more in railways across the country than any Government since Victorian times, including in the north of England. Across the country, the Government have invested £0.25 trillion in infrastructure projects since 2010, 4,500 of which have already been completed.

Major Infrastructure Investment

5. **Julian Sturdy** (York Outer) (Con): What plans the Government have to invest in major infrastructure during the 2017 Parliament. [904032]

7. **Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): What plans the Government have to invest in major infrastructure during the 2017 Parliament. [904034]

8. **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): What plans the Government have to invest in major infrastructure during the 2017 Parliament. [904035]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): As my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury has just told the House, there has been more than £0.25 trillion of public and private investment in infrastructure since 2010. We continued to invest in infrastructure in the autumn Budget 2017 by expanding

the national productivity investment fund, so that it will now provide £31 billion of additional investment, including more than doubling the housing infrastructure fund to £5 billion. The Institute for Fiscal Studies said after the Budget that our plans will see public investment increase to levels not sustained in 40 years.

Julian Sturdy: Through the major road network, vehicle excise duty will be made available for investment in strategic roads outside the remit of Highways England. I understand that economic growth must be a priority, but how much will the pressure of future housing developments be considered in any of these future schemes? My constituency in York, for example, is surrounded by the northern ring road and we have a lot of housing coming forward.

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is right that the major road network will support the creation of new housing developments by improving access to future development sites and boosting suitable land capacity, so investment decisions for this funding will include consideration of how proposed schemes will unlock land for housing developments, helping to improve how transport is planned for new developments at the outset. The ring road to which he refers is, of course, part of the proposed major road network.

Priti Patel: The Chancellor will know of the great eastern main line taskforce, which has made the economic and business case for rail infrastructure directly to the Treasury. He will also know that Greater Anglia commuters are forking out £3.7 billion to the Treasury under the current rail franchise. Will he ensure that we can get some of that money back out to invest in the much-needed infrastructure improvements for which our commuters are campaigning?

Mr Hammond: My right hon. Friend is a great champion of infrastructure in Essex, and I share her wish to create a more dependable railway with an increased focus on punctuality and reliability, which is why the Government are pursuing the biggest rail investment programme since Victorian times. Under the Greater Anglia franchise, there is a commitment to deliver more services and faster journey times, including two “Norwich in 90” trains each way a day from May 2019. The great eastern main line proposals are currently at an early stage of development, but we will carefully consider the case she has made for the passing loop.

Giles Watling: Will the Chancellor update the House on the steps being taken to ensure the Government’s ambitious plans for housing are supported by local infrastructure investment, such as through the housing infrastructure fund?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is right to observe that we cannot build the homes this country needs without infrastructure. Often, the push-back from local communities against the idea of accommodating greater numbers of homes is caused by the fear that infrastructure will not keep pace. The autumn Budget 2017 more than doubled the housing infrastructure fund, taking it to a total of £5 billion. On 1 February 2018, we announced the first £866 million of investment from that fund to support 133 projects, which will unlock infrastructure for up to 200,000 new homes.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): It is now two years and two months since the Boxing day floods hit much of Yorkshire, including my constituency. Kirkstall in Leeds is no better protected from floods than it was on Boxing day 2015, and the Government still have not signed off money for the phase 2 Leeds flood alleviation scheme. When will that happen? The scheme is urgently needed to protect my constituents and local businesses from devastating floods such as those that we have already experienced.

Mr Hammond: My constituency has also been affected by flooding, and some of the responses are major engineering projects that take time to develop. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Environment Agency have funding for flood relief projects, but those developments have to be prioritised and worked up into proper business cases. I will look at the specific case the hon. Lady raises and, if I may, I will write to her and place a copy of my letter in the Library of the House.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Some of the most important national infrastructure projects include the network of tidal lagoons for low-carbon energy. As the Treasury has, apparently, approved the project as good value for money, why is it allowing dinosaurs in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to block it?

Mr Hammond: I imagine that the right hon. Gentleman is referring to the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon project which, as he knows, is under consideration by the Government. An announcement will be made in due course.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): Contrary to the Treasury’s own assessment, a report by the Institute for Public Policy Research North recently found that transport investment in London is two and a half times higher per capita than in the north. We know that in Norwich Britvic is shedding hundreds of jobs, citing poor transport as a key cause. That inequality hurts business and local authority revenue, so what actions will Ministers take to redress this unjust imbalance? Will they commit to working with the Mayors of Manchester and Liverpool on the convention for the north that was announced this morning?

Mr Hammond: I just do not recognise or agree with the hon. Gentleman’s figures. The Infrastructure and Projects Authority’s analysis shows that infrastructure investment per capita in the north is actually higher than in the south-east.

21. [904048] **Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con):** The Chancellor has spoken out in favour of rebalancing the economy via a fairer distribution of transport spending. Will he therefore consider Transport for the North’s strategic transport plan, which calls for a 50% increase in transport spending across the north of England?

Mr Hammond: The Government are committed to the northern powerhouse project and recognise that that has to be supported through infrastructure investment. We are looking at northern powerhouse infrastructure

investment projects on a case-by-case basis, and we will continue to support the development of the northern powerhouse.

Leaving the EU

6. Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on the economy of the UK leaving the single market and the customs union. [904033]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Government are undertaking a wide-ranging set of analyses of the impact of our departure from the European Union. This is changing through time as we develop our approach and we move to a bold and comprehensive agreement with our EU partners.

Geraint Davies: The Chancellor knew in 2016 that the majority of people would prefer a soft Brexit to a hard Brexit. I am referring to remainers, plus people such as the Foreign Secretary, who said he favoured a single market and would vote for it. Now that the Chancellor knows that a hard Brexit will cost us £45 billion in lost tax receipts, will he at least acknowledge that people such as me on both sides of the Chamber who support our remaining in both the customs union and the single market do so in the name of prosperity and of upholding democracy?

Mel Stride: The Government have made their position very clear: we are leaving the European Union, and that means we are leaving the customs union and the single market. However, we are determined to negotiate a deal under which our trade with the EU27 is as frictionless as possible and we are able, as a globally facing nation, to secure free trade agreements with other countries around the world.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that the Conservative Government are and will continue to be the voice of British business, and that securing a strong economic future will be at the heart of the Brexit negotiations?

Mel Stride: I thank my right hon. Friend very much indeed for that question. I can of course confirm that we remain entirely committed to the strength of our economy and to supporting businesses up and down the country, not least in our negotiations with the European Union. I have some responsibility for the customs part of the negotiations, and we are committed to making sure that goods and services move as frictionlessly as possible across the boundaries with the EU27 following our departure.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Mr Speaker,

“I believe that the best way forward is for Britain to renegotiate a new relationship with the European Union—one based on an economic partnership involving a customs union and a single market in goods and services.”

Those are not my words, but the words of the Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade on his website. What representations has the Minister had from the Secretary of State in support of our membership of the customs union and single market?

Mel Stride: The Secretary of State for International Trade is fully committed to the options that we set out in last year's White Papers on the customs union and on trade. We are taking forward legislation to make sure that our aspirations in that respect for our negotiations with the EU can be landed when the deals are concluded.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Yesterday, I met a delegation of business representatives from my constituency who are optimistic about our prospects when we leave the single market and customs union. They are examining the concept of a free port for Immingham. Will the Minister agree to meet them when they have further developed their thoughts so that we can try to overcome possible obstacles?

Mel Stride: I—or, indeed, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury—would of course be happy to meet my hon. Friend and the business colleagues from his constituency. We are potentially interested in free ports and will keep the idea under review.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Many Cabinet members have made their views clear about the single market and customs union. The Chancellor has said that he would like to see no tariffs with Europe after we leave the EU and no hard border in Northern Ireland. His exact words, which were in a letter to the Treasury Committee, were that he wants a deal

“that facilitates the freest and most frictionless trade possible in goods between the UK and the EU, and allows us to forge new trade relationships with our partners in Europe and around the world.”

Will the Financial Secretary therefore welcome the speech that the Leader of the Opposition gave yesterday in which he proposed a new UK-EU customs union that would, to quote the Chancellor directly, facilitate

“the freest and most frictionless trade possible in goods between the UK and the EU”

and allow us to

“forge new trade relationships with our partners in Europe and around the world”?

Mel Stride: I am here to speak about Government policy, as you have quite rightly indicated, Mr Speaker. However, if I may say so, Opposition Members' zig-zagging in respect of their position on the customs union has been quite extraordinary. If I understand what is being suggested, it seems to me, at a first take, that the idea that we can be in the customs union yet go out and have a high level of control over deals and free trade arrangements with other countries just does not hang together.

The Welsh Economy

9. Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What recent assessment his Department has made of the effect of Government investment on the Welsh economy. [904036]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): My hon. Friend will know that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced an additional £1.2 billion for Wales in the Budget. We maintain our position of ensuring that Welsh Government funding per head is some 15% or more above the rate in England. As a

consequence of those and other measures, Wales is now one of the fastest growing of the nations and regions of the United Kingdom.

Chris Davies: Does my right hon. Friend agree that leaving the UK single market would represent a far bigger risk to the Welsh economy than leaving the EU single market?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is entirely right. It is a simple fact that some 80% of Welsh exports go to the other nations of the United Kingdom, compared with just 12% going into the European Union. Those figures speak for themselves.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): Traditionally, Wales has lower wages than the rest of the economy. In the light of low productivity and growth forecasts, what are the Government doing to attract high-quality jobs to the Welsh economy?

Mel Stride: As the House will know, we are doing a great deal for productivity throughout the country. We have agreed two city deals in Wales, with £500 million for Cardiff and £115.6 million for Swansea. Since 2010, employment in Wales is up by 7.3% and unemployment is down by 39%.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): My question is this: what investment? The Government have broken their promise to electrify the main line between the two main cities in my country, they will not commit to the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon, and the Swansea Bay city deal is 90% Welsh public and private money. At the same time, the Government are subsidising the most expensive railway in the world—in England. When will the British Government stop taking Wales for a ride?

Mel Stride: I am surprised to hear the hon. Gentleman level those accusations against the Government because, as I have explained, we set aside an additional £1.2 billion for Wales in the recent Budget. I have referred to the two city deals, and we are also backing the south Wales metro, as he will know. We are committed to agreeing further growth deals with north and south Wales.

EU Exit Analysis

10. **Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab):** What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union on the Government's preliminary EU exit analysis; and if he will make a statement. [904037]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The cross-Whitehall analysis referred to is provisional internal analysis—it is part of a broad, ongoing programme of analysis—and further work is in train. The analysis has been developed as a tool to inform Ministers on the European Union Exit and Trade Committee and its Sub-Committees about the choices that must be made as negotiations progress.

Catherine McKinnell: I thank the Chancellor for that answer. Does he agree with the former permanent secretary at the Department for International Trade that giving up the single market and the customs union is like giving up a three-course meal for a packet of crisps in the future? If not, can he identify what specific evidence

his Department has seen to suggest that the benefits of future trade agreements will outweigh the damage of leaving the single market and the customs union to businesses and jobs across the country, particularly in the north-east?

Mr Hammond: The Government intend to maintain the greatest possible access for British businesses to European Union markets. The hon. Lady is right that we should approach this on the basis of evidence. We should look for evidence of the value of our trade flows with Europe and what jobs they generate in the UK, and we should look objectively at the opportunities that arise with third-country trade deals and with the likely profile of the new jobs, trade and opportunities that can be created, and then weigh those carefully.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Leaks from the Brexit analysis show that UK Government borrowing will rise dramatically under Brexit, with figures ranging from £45 billion to £120 billion in a worst-case scenario. Can the Chancellor reassure us that he will not cut vital public services to plug this gap?

Mr Hammond: As the hon. Lady knows, the analysis to which she refers is based on standardised, off-the-shelf trade models. The Government are seeking a bespoke deal with the European Union to deliver a deep economic partnership, which would have a completely different set of outcomes. That remains our objective.

Public Sector Pay and Equality

11. **Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab):** What equality impact assessments his Department has undertaken on the Government's policy on the public sector pay cap. [904038]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): It is for Departments to consider the equalities impact of their proposals on workforce strategy and pay. The important thing is that we reward public servants fairly for the work they do.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Well, public sector servants have certainly not been rewarded fairly, but let me turn to pay differentials in the private sector. Is the Chief Secretary as concerned as I am that many private sector firms are excluding partners' income in their reporting obligations on the gender pay gap, on the basis that they are not employees? What will the Government do to close that loophole?

Elizabeth Truss: We have announced new policies on reporting the private sector pay gap. The pay gap has come down under this Government and we are now seeing a record number of women in work, and the reason is that we have taken the difficult economic decision to close the deficit and ensured that we have allowed the private sector to flourish.

17. [904044] **David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab):** With inflation at 3% and Government cuts to council tax and police budgets forcing up precepts, why should low-paid workers, who are predominantly women, have an increase of only 1% next year, after four years of 1% already?

Elizabeth Truss: First, I point out that those on the lowest pay have seen their real wages rise by 7% since 2015, which is the highest level for some time. Also, it is women who are more likely to be in work, with record levels of employment. We have also given additional flexibility to public services to ensure that they can recruit and retain.

Household Debt

12. **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): What plans he has to tackle household debt. [904039]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Government are taking a proactive approach to support borrowers, to aid people to manage their money well, and to help those in problem debt. We reformed the regulation, giving the Financial Conduct Authority considerable regulatory powers, and we are setting up a new single financial guidance body to make it easier for people to get help with money matters.

Imran Hussain: After seven wasted years, wages are still lower than they were in 2010. Self-employed people are paid less on average than they were a generation ago and 6 million people are earning less than the living wage. Does the Minister share my alarm that too many people have to worry about buying school uniforms, affording a family holiday, or even just paying their rent or mortgage?

John Glen: The Government recognise that it is very important that we focus on the poorest people in our society. That is why we have increased the national living wage by 4.7%, which will mean a pay rise of £600 for those working full time. We have also increased the personal allowance, frozen fuel duty and increased childcare support to attend to the concerns that the hon. Gentleman has raised.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): As part of the Treasury Committee's inquiry into household finances, we are looking at the problems facing financially vulnerable households. Last week, my Committee colleague, the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), and I visited the citizens advice bureau in Nottingham. Caseworkers there told us about the problems caused by banks and companies, but said that the harshest creditor of all is the Government. There is little forbearance for late council tax or welfare overpayments, and bailiffs are often the first port of call, rather than a last resort. Is the Minister concerned by this heavy-handedness? Does he agree that central and local government should lead by example in their treatment of the most financially vulnerable?

John Glen: I acknowledge the vital work that my right hon. Friend and her Committee are undertaking in this important area. We will be implementing a breathing space as part of the work of the single financial guidance body. The Bill establishing that body is in Committee, as my right hon. Friend will know. I am absolutely determined that we will get this right and listen to best practice across the country. We committed in our manifesto to a six-week breathing space, and we will look carefully at the representations received from across the country.

22. [904049] **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Citizens Advice reports that there are universal credit claimants who are having more than 40% of their standard allowance taken from their monthly payment. There is a 40% cap on repayments to third parties, but that does not appear to cover repayments of advanced or budgeting loans. This is leaving people unable to make ends meet—for example, one person retained just £97. Will the Minister agree to meet his colleagues at the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that people are not pushed into debt by the Government's rules?

John Glen: Of course I will meet with colleagues in government. I am meeting the relevant Minister as we seek to get this legislation right, and I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman as well.

Leaving the EU

13. **Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the potential merits for the economy of the UK adopting an EEA Norway-style arrangement after the UK leaves the EU. [904040]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): Membership of the European economic area would require free movement of people with the rest of the European Union, and the UK Government have been clear that the free movement of people cannot continue as it does now. We are seeking a bespoke, comprehensive and ambitious economic partnership in the mutual interests of the UK and the EU.

Antoinette Sandbach: The Government's own forecast suggests that a no-deal Brexit will cut GDP growth by 12% in the north-west of England. What steps is the Chancellor taking to minimise the impact of a no-deal, WTO-terms Brexit on my constituents in Eddisbury?

Mr Hammond: As I said in answer to a previous question, the figures to which my hon. Friend refers are based on standardised trade models, not the bespoke deal that we are seeking to achieve. She asks what steps I am taking to protect her constituents' interests. I am supporting my colleagues in seeking to negotiate an ambitious economic partnership with the EU that delivers the maximum possible benefits for both the EU and the UK.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): What assessment has the Chancellor made in particular of the potential benefits of EEA membership for the £91.8 billion contribution to the UK economy made by the creative industries that are so important for my constituents in Bristol West?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that the creative industries are one of Britain's great success stories. More broadly, our services sector is our strategic strength in many respects. As we negotiate our future relationship with the European Union, we have to ensure that we protect not only the market in goods, but the market in services, where Britain has such significant comparative advantage.

Technological Progress

14. **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that the economic benefits of technological progress are shared throughout the UK. [904041]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): By helping all places to access the benefits of technological progress and reach their full potential, we can drive growth at national level. Since autumn 2016, the Government have announced an additional £7 billion for science and innovation—an increase of about 20% to total Government R&D spending by 2021.

Chris Green: Does the Minister agree that digital technology enables further devolution away from London of high-tech industries? What are the Government doing to support that?

John Glen: The Government are expanding Tech City's reach across the UK, creating Tech Nation by investing £21 million over four years to help people grow digital businesses. That includes a large-scale CityVerve smart city demonstrator in Manchester, which demonstrates how the internet of things, technologies and services can improve local services in transport, energy, health and culture.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Newcastle has national centres of excellence in data, health and energy—key drivers of our future economy. On Saturday, I held a business summit with Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, at which start-ups identified attracting investment as a key barrier to their growth. What are the Government doing to attract investment to businesses in Newcastle? Does that include a regional business bank, as supported by Labour?

John Glen: We certainly have a national bank to encourage investment in small businesses. We also have the £400 million digital infrastructure fund. As a Minister, I am doing all I can to ensure that we find the best conditions for investing in small and medium-sized enterprises across the country.

Regional Infrastructure Development

15. **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What fiscal steps he is taking to support regional infrastructure development. [904042]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): As the Institute for Fiscal Studies has confirmed, under our plan, public investment will reach levels not sustained since the late 1970s by the end of this Parliament. We want to see that investment across the United Kingdom. We are delivering £13 billion of transport investment in the north and have launched a £1.7 billion transport fund to transform our great cities.

Mike Amesbury: Devolution in the Labour-controlled Liverpool city region and Greater Manchester is beginning to unlock opportunities for investment in infrastructure, research and development, and innovation in the north-west, allowing facilities such as the Daresbury campus in my constituency to develop and prosper. Does the Minister agree that if we are to be able to realise the full potential of our regions, devolution needs to extend to the many of my constituents and not the few?

Robert Jenrick: I am delighted to hear the positive story that the hon. Gentleman has given to the devolution that we have created as a Government. In the past week I have met the Mayors of Liverpool and Greater Manchester. We are committed to working with anyone who shares our commitment to the economic growth and prosperity of the north of England.

The Scottish Economy

16. **Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of Government investment on the Scottish economy. [904043]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Government are committed to driving up investment in Scotland; my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced an additional £2 billion at the last Budget. We have already boosted city deals by £1 billion and have committed further to looking at city deals in Stirling, Tay Cities and the borderlands.

Andrew Bowie: I am sure that my right hon. Friend will share my concern, and that of my constituents, at recent statistics showing that trend-based productivity in Scotland had declined by 3.2% in the year end to September 2017—well below the levels of the UK and its lowest level in eight years. Does he agree that instead of making Scotland the highest-tax part of the UK and increasing the tax burden on businesses, the Scottish Government should be encouraged to follow this Government's lead—encouraging enterprise, boosting economic development and growing UK productivity to its highest levels in 10 years?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the critical issue of productivity, which is, of course, the responsibility of not just this Government but the Scottish Government. I totally agree with him about the tax matter that he raised. It is important that we keep taxes down. To the extent that that has been achieved in Scotland, it has been to a large degree because of the changes we have made to the personal allowance—a decision taken by this Government in this House.

Local Authority Funding

18. **Fiona Onasanya** (Peterborough) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on trends in the level of funding for local authorities since 2010. [904045]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): We have made sure that local councils have the full ability to serve local residents by giving them additional council tax flexibility.

Fiona Onasanya: I thank the Minister for that answer, but between 2010 and 2020, Peterborough City Council will have had its direct funding cut by 78.7%. Can she explain how my authority is expected to meet the rising children's services and adult social care demands?

Elizabeth Truss: As laid out in the local government settlement, councils have been given the ability to increase council tax levels to pay for those services. It is vital that those taxes are raised locally, so that local councillors are accountable for the decisions they make.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government will move promptly to a new fair funding formula for local government to replace the untransparent and unfair system? Will she look closely at the Leicestershire model for doing that?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Local government funding has not been fair enough. That is why we are consulting on a fair formula at the moment, and I will look with interest at his representations.

Deficit Reduction

20. **Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): What progress is being made on reducing the deficit. [904047]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): In 2010, we had a post-war record level of deficit at 9.9%, and we have reduced that to 2.3% as of last year. The Office for Budget Responsibility forecast in November is that the deficit will further decline to 1.1% of GDP by 2022-23.

Robert Courts: Will the Minister give an estimate of the effect that our deficit reduction measures have had on relieving the tax burden for younger generations?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend raises a critical point about the importance of getting the debt down to make sure that future generations do not carry the burden of it. That is why we have reduced the deficit by three quarters and why we are going to hit our reduction in the level of debt as a percentage of GDP two years early, in 2020-21.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) is a really eager young pup, and at this early point in his parliamentary career, I think we ought to hear the fella.

Mr Sheerman: Mr Speaker, you will know that I am not the most radical Member on the Labour Benches, but I want to tell the Minister that if the Government had been successfully reducing their budget, my constituents in Yorkshire could forgive her. The fact of the matter is that we have had the money for the electrification of the trans-Pennine railway stolen from us, and the Chancellor refuses to give it back. When will he make amends?

Mel Stride: As the hon. Gentleman will know, whether he is young or a puppy or whatever he may be, we are awaiting the business case for the trans-Pennine project, and when we receive it, we will look at it most closely.

Gender Diversity

24. **Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): What recent assessment the Government have made of gender diversity in the financial services sector. [904052]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): In summer 2015, the Government asked Jayne-Anne Gadhia, CEO of Virgin Money, to lead a review into gender diversity in the financial services sector. In response, the Treasury launched the women in finance charter, which asks firms to commit to four key actions as recommended in the review. So far, 162 firms have signed the charter, which covers more than 600,000 UK financial service employees.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the Minister for that excellent answer. Following the Royal Mint's appointment of its first female chief executive in its 1,100-year history, will the Minister join me in congratulating her on her new role?

John Glen: Yes, I am delighted to congratulate Anne Jessopp, and I wish her all the best in her new role. If I may, Mr Speaker, I would also like to take this opportunity to applaud and congratulate my own constituent, Minette Batters, who was elected as the first woman president of the National Farmers Union. I wish the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs all the best with that.

Mr Speaker: I am sure he will read that with some anxiety.

Topical Questions

T1. [904055] **Sir Hugo Swire** (East Devon) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): My principal responsibility is to ensure economic stability and the continued prosperity of the British people, and I will do so by building on the plans set out in the autumn Budget. This Government are determined to meet the important challenges we face and to seize the opportunities ahead as we create an economy fit for the future. Our balanced approach to the public finances enables us to give households and businesses support in the near term and to invest in the future of this country, while also being fair to the next generation by reducing a national debt that remains far too large.

Sir Hugo Swire: Reducing tourism VAT to 5% after we leave the European Union would create an extra 121,000 jobs and £4.6 billion in revenue to the Treasury over 10 years. It would be a great boost not only to our great cities, but to our great coastal towns, such as Exmouth, Sidmouth and Budleigh Salterton in my East Devon constituency. Will the Chancellor commit to looking again at this issue as we leave the EU?

Mr Hammond: My right hon. Friend is nothing if not persistent and consistent. I cannot remember how many times he has raised this issue. There have been numerous requests for new VAT reliefs since the referendum, some of which are currently not permitted under EU law. We have calculated that if we were to grant all the VAT relief requests that we have received, that would come to more than £38 billion a year. The Government have received representations on VAT and tourism, and we are looking again at the case for change.¹ We have issued a call for evidence on the impact of VAT and

air passenger duty on tourism in Northern Ireland, and we will certainly keep this issue under careful review.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): The Chief Secretary gave a speech last year calling for better value for money from the public finances and not spending money we do not have, and she has talked about not wasting money today, so how can she justify spending hundreds of millions of pounds on further tax giveaways worth £2,000 per child to the wealthiest families—those, for example, using private schools—via the tax-free childcare scheme? Is that not a waste of money and spending money we do not have?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): I would point out to the hon. Gentleman that the voucher scheme invented by the previous Labour Government benefited only 600,000 families whereas our scheme is much broader—it benefits 1.5 million people—and the Labour Government's scheme was open to private schools and private nurseries as well.

T3. [904057] **Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con):** Last week in the Chamber, we yet again heard an Opposition MP complain that they believed they should personally be paying far more tax. Will the Minister confirm the mechanism by which anybody can currently do exactly that voluntarily?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): As a Minister at the Treasury, I am delighted if people voluntarily step forward to pay more tax than they are due. I am pleased to inform my hon. Friend that that is already possible by way of a gift to the Crown. I am looking at ways of raising awareness of that particular opportunity, and I would be happy to meet him to discuss such options. I would also point out to right hon. and hon. Members the very generous gift aid reliefs that the Treasury provides for those who wish to make direct payments to charities of their choice.

T2. [904056] **Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab):** Four in 10 of Enfield's children are living below the poverty line, which is almost 34,000 children. The borough is the 11th most impoverished area for children in the UK, and my constituency is now among the top 20 constituencies in the country with the fastest growing levels of child poverty. Is the Chancellor pursuing any kind of joined-up policies with other relevant Departments to do what the Prime Minister said, and “make Britain a country that works not for a privileged few, but for every one of us”, including those 34,000 children?

Mel Stride: The Government believe that work is one of the most important drivers of bringing people out of poverty, and we are rolling out universal credit as a consequence. There is evidence that that is more successful as a way of doing so than relying on legacy benefits. As the right hon. Lady will probably know, 200,000 fewer children are now in absolute poverty than was the case in 2010.

T5. [904059] **Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind):** What preparations has the Treasury been making for leaving the European Union, and will the Treasury be ready on day one to ensure frictionless borders when we leave the European Union—deal or no deal?

Mr Philip Hammond: The Government are continuing with detailed preparations for all possible March 2019 scenarios, including ensuring that Departments have adequate resources to prepare effectively for EU exit. To date, the Treasury has allocated to Departments nearly £700 million for preparation activity, and we are currently in the process of allocating the 2018-19 funding from the additional £3 billion over two years that I announced at autumn Budget 2017.

T4. [904058] **Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab):** “The health and social care system has been pushed to its limits in recent weeks”—those are not my words, but those of my local hospital trust. Last month, it was forced to cancel about 325 operations and 640 outpatient appointments. That not only means that my constituents who are unwell or in pain are being made to wait longer for treatment but makes the trust's already challenging financial situation even worse. When is the Chancellor going to give our health and social care system the sustainable funding it needs?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady should acknowledge that the NHS has been rated as the best healthcare system in the world. We recognise that there are extra demands on the health system and that is why we put in an extra £6.3 billion of funding at the Budget.

T6. [904060] **Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con):** What progress has been made in reducing the level of corporation tax evasion?

Mel Stride: I am delighted to inform the House that considerable progress has been made in reducing the level of tax evasion, avoidance and non-compliance in the corporate sector. We have been at the forefront of initiatives launched with the OECD—the base erosion and profit shifting initiative, the profit diversion tax we brought in in 2015—and, as a consequence of clamping down in this area, we have brought in £53 billion from big business since 2010.

T7. [904061] **Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab):** Members have already raised the insufficient funding of local authorities by this Government. A recent campaign in Lewisham prevented local children's and adolescents' mental health services from being cut, but they are still facing a 5% loss in funding from national Government. When will the Government finally take this seriously and reverse the cuts to children's mental health services?

Elizabeth Truss: We are putting additional funding and support into children's mental health services and the Department for Education has recently announced additional support for children's mental health issues in schools.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend tell the House what assessment the Treasury has made either separately or jointly with the Department for Transport of how external initiatives on competitiveness and investment might help the rail sector and Network Rail in particular?

Mr Philip Hammond: Strictly, this is an issue for my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary, and he is looking at how to improve productivity in the railway and how to ensure that every pound we invest in the

railway delivers the maximum possible benefit to railway users. He will make further announcements in due course.

T8. [904062] Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Could the Chancellor set out the benefits or otherwise of the arrangements the Government appear to have for a customs union between Camden, Islington and Westminster?

Mr Hammond: I am sure that when I go home and reflect on it, the deep meaning of that question will become clear to me. What I will say to the hon. Lady is that if we look at how goods and services flow freely between different parts of our own economy, and indeed between different parts of the United Kingdom, we see at once the huge benefit that it brings to have frictionless borders as we move our goods and services.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): I am very much in favour of gift aid, but some large charities say that they receive no direct support from Government but do receive gift aid and the Exchequer will not publish those figures. Will the Chancellor reconsider this?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The Revenue does not disclose the sums that individual charities receive from gift aid due to its obligations to respect taxpayer confidentiality under the 2005 legislation. Of course, some large charities do so voluntarily. Cancer Research is one example, and receives £31 million in this way. I am sympathetic to my right hon. Friend's argument and will take the matter forward.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Ryanair has announced the slashing of more than 20 Glasgow airport routes, a cut of more than 1 million passengers and the loss of up to 300 jobs. The high level of APD and the delay in introducing the air departure tax—caused by this Government's not notifying the European Commission regarding the ongoing exemption for the highlands and islands—have been cited as a reason. Another is the Brexit uncertainty in the aviation sector. With more routes and jobs likely to go, what are the Chancellor and his colleagues doing to support the aviation sector during Brexit negotiations?

Mel Stride: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the devolution of ADT has been delayed after consultations between ourselves and the Scottish Government. Both Governments are satisfied with the arrangements. As for Ryanair, I believe that part of the announcement was also that the company would be extending the number of routes out of Edinburgh airport.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): If we want a sustainable rise in wages, we will need higher productivity. Does my right hon. Friend therefore welcome the recent improvement in the figures?

Mr Philip Hammond: Yes. We have had two quarters of good productivity data, but we should recognise that the productivity challenge we face is long term. The Government have taken a range of measures to address it and we will watch the evolution of the data very

carefully, but there is certainly absolutely no scope for any complacency about the scale of the challenge we face, and we are determined to rise to it.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Artificial intelligence brings huge economic opportunities, but to date big tech companies have seemed even more likely than traditional corporates to engage in aggressive tax avoidance and concentrate power in the hands of a narrow, homogenous group of people. What will the Treasury do to ensure that companies in this growing industry pay their own way fairly and take account of their wider corporate responsibility to society?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady will know that we made announcements in the Budget in respect of the taxation of digitally based businesses that operate from digital platforms and so create value as a consequence. We are consulting on the measures we may take. We said in our consultation document that it is possible we will look at revenue taxes as one particular approach. Our preference is a multilateral move with our partners in the European Union and the OECD, but we are prepared to go it alone if that proves necessary.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The services sector makes a huge tax contribution to the public purse. What confidence can the Chancellor give to my constituents who work in financial services that our new free trade agreement will cover services as well as goods?

Mr Philip Hammond: We are clear that a future comprehensive trade partnership with the European Union must include goods as well as services. A deal can only be done if it is fair to both sides, and because of the shape of the UK economy it would be very difficult to see how any deal could be fair if it did not include services. We have heard it asserted that it is impossible for services to be part of a trade agreement. I do not believe that that is the case. Next week, I shall make a speech in which I will set out our view of how it is possible to include services within such a trade deal.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Chancellor referred earlier to what he called the "continued prosperity" in the UK. Will he undertake to ensure that a simplification of the tax system is undertaken by looking at the level at which low paid full-time and part-time employees get the first £300 a week free of national insurance and income tax, to try to raise prosperity among all sections of the community?

Mr Hammond: We will continue to seek to simplify the tax system, although I have to say that my personal observation is that whenever there is a proposal to simplify, those who benefit from complexities quickly speak up. They are not always people on high incomes; they are often people on lower incomes. We shall continue to try to simplify the system in a way that is fair and appropriate for all.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): While accepting that the Ministry of Defence is in need of serious reform as well as more money, will the Chancellor confirm that he has agreed with the Secretary of State for Defence that there will be no further reductions in

capability while the modernising defence review takes place, and that the money required to do that, in the region of £2 billion, will be forthcoming?

Mr Hammond: As the House will know, I had the privilege to serve for nearly three years as Defence Secretary and I yield to no one in my admiration for the work of our armed forces. I also understand how complex and challenging managing the defence budget is: it is a multi-annual budget with many complex procurements. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and I are working very closely with our right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary as he carries out the modernisation review. We will ensure that defence has the funding it needs to continue to defend this country appropriately.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): North Derbyshire clinical commissioning group finished last year £27 million in the red, and £16 million of cuts were demanded. In spite of closing hospital beds at a time when they are most needed, it will again end this year £27 million in the red. When will the Government give the NHS a sustainable settlement to enable it to provide proper services?

Elizabeth Truss: We have given the NHS a sustainable settlement. It received an additional £6.3 billion, but it is also important that we reform our healthcare services, that we put in place sustainable transformation plans, and that we are investing in capital and new technology and making sure that we use our fantastic frontline workers—nurses and doctors—in the best way possible.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): As the Chancellor knows, investment in infrastructure is key to ensuring that we can build the thousands of

homes that this country needs. Will the Chancellor agree to meet me, other Hertfordshire MPs and the leader of Hertfordshire County Council to discuss how we might be able to do that in Hertfordshire, where we need to deliver about 100,000 new homes?

Mr Philip Hammond: Yes, I am always delighted to meet my hon. Friend and his colleagues. Hertfordshire is one of the high-pressure housing areas, where it is absolutely essential that we deliver additional housing if we are to improve affordability.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Cold weather payments were triggered in all postcodes in my constituency yesterday—information that I shared on social media—yet a constituent contacted me this morning to say that when she contacted the universal credit people, they said they knew nothing about it. Given the freezing weather and the fact that people will be nervous about turning on their heating if they do not know they can pay for it, will the Minister work with colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions to resolve the situation as soon as possible?

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, and I will look into the point that she raised immediately. This is obviously an immediate issue in relation to the cold weather that we are having now. I will find out and let her know later.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am awfully sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues. I allowed some injury time because a wholly disproportionate amount of time was spent discussing the policies of parties other than the Government, but we must now move on.

Mental Health Act: CQC Report

12.41 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): Thank you very much for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. This morning, the Care Quality Commission published—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am immensely grateful to the hon. Lady, but she needs to say, “To ask the Minister for a statement, etc.” She will get her full go—her full bite at the cherry—when the Minister has delivered the initial statement. That is the way it works.

Luciana Berger: To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make a statement on the Care Quality Commission’s report, “Monitoring the Mental Health Act in 2016/17”.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): The Government welcome the CQC’s latest annual report, which it produces as part of its statutory duty to monitor how mental health providers exercise powers and discharge their duties when people are detained under the Mental Health Act 1983. We are committed to ensuring that the Act works better for patients and their families, and this is why we have commissioned an independent review led by Professor Sir Simon Wessely, which will make recommendations in autumn. We are also investing more in mental health than ever before, spending an estimated record £11.6bn this year.

We have seen that the number of detentions under the Act has been rising year on year: it rose by 2% last year and by 9% the year before that. We also know that black people are disproportionately affected. These were both driving reasons for the Prime Minister’s decision to call for a review of how the entire Act is operating. The Government have already acted when they saw that the Act was not working properly. Last year, we legislated to make it illegal to use police cells as places of safety for children under the Act, and to ensure that police officers consult health support staff before using their detention powers.

Sir Simon, his vice-chairs and the independent review’s team are consulting actively and widely with service users and professionals, and today are taking part in a major stakeholder event in Newcastle. Indeed, I welcome the fact that the CQC takes care in its report to state: “We have confidence that the independent review’s solutions-focused approach to identifying priorities, based on the feedback and experiences of people across the country, will offer a review of the MHA that has the confidence of patients and professionals.” The CQC is, of course, directly involved in that review.

The CQC’s report found examples of good practice, but we recognise that more needs to be done to ensure that people’s voices are heard and their rights respected. Where possible, we expect all patients to be involved in their care planning and that providers should consider how best to do this in the light of the CQC’s recommendations. In the spring, the review will provide an interim report identifying priorities for its work. It will then develop a final report containing detailed recommendations on its priorities. This final report should be delivered by autumn 2018.

There are problems with the Act, and we will address them, but we should remember that today no one gets sent to an asylum only to disappear within its walls. There are regular reviews, clear rights of appeal and checks to ensure that people are lawfully detained only to get the treatment they need. Our society is changing how it thinks about mental illness, however, and we want to ensure that people have as much liberty and autonomy as possible.

Luciana Berger: This scathing report finds that too many patients subject to the Mental Health Act continue to experience care that does not fully protect their rights or ensure their wellbeing. Some Members might have seen the harrowing episode of “Dispatches” last week, which showed scenes of a patient experiencing violent restraint at the Priory Group’s Dene Hospital. Today’s CQC report indicates that these experiences are not isolated. It shows no improvement in key areas of concern raised by the commission in previous years. It is totally unacceptable. In fact, some of the indicators are getting worse. Why is there still no evidence of patient involvement in 32% of care plans—up from 29% last year; of patients’ views being recorded in 31% of care plans—up from 26% last year; and of consideration of the least-restrictive care options in 17% of cases—up from 10% last year? This last, in particular, is a matter of serious concern. We know that the period following discharge from in-patient care is when most suicides happen. Why, then, in 24% of care plans was there no evidence that plans were made for discharging patients back home?

The report exposes the pressure on high secure hospital placements for women. One patient was in long-term segregation for over a year while waiting to access a bed. The Minister, to whom I listened closely, referred to the review by Sir Simon Wessely, but his review and report cannot provide answers to this patient or many hundreds more across the country today. Despite repeated Government promises of parity of esteem, we have seen yet another year of inaction. Does she accept that, in 2018 here in England, what is outlined in today’s CQC report is completely unacceptable, and will she tell us exactly what she is going to do this week to ensure that no patient in our country in a mental health unit is deprived unnecessarily of their human rights?

Jackie Doyle-Price: It is worth reminding the House why we introduced the CQC—to provide for transparent inquiry into the performance of our health services and so ensure they remain the best in the world. It is for precisely this reason—to make sure we do better—that we invite the CQC to do so so honestly and take any criticism arising from the transparent scrutiny that characterises this and all its reports. We recognise that we can always do better. The duty of candour in the NHS under this Government means that we will step up to the plate and respond to these challenges.

The hon. Lady describes the report as “scathing”. In fact, it highlights a positive direction of travel on access to advocates and promoting good physical health, and an improved direction of travel on care after discharge, so I do not accept the tenor with which she characterised the report. I would go further and quote the deputy chief executive of the CQC, who also highlighted the parallel review by Sir Simon Wessely. He says: “We have confidence that the independent review’s solutions-focused

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

approach to identifying priorities, based on the feedback and experiences of people across the country, will offer a review of the MHA that has the confidence of patients and professionals.” The report also highlights that Sir Simon Wessely is already undertaking and identifying actions that can be taken outside new legislation, and the CQC is very much part of delivering that.

Far from being complacent, we recognise that we have a long way to go, which is one reason the Prime Minister has put mental health firmly at the top of our health agenda. The report identifies a positive direction of travel, but we will continue to turbo-charge it and deliver sustained improvements in mental health services.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Are there any proposals to address the fact that three quarters of GPs have no formal mental health training?

Jackie Doyle-Price: One of the things that we are doing in prioritising mental health is dealing with exactly that issue. We are having discussions with every part of the health community. We recognise that all the professional organisations have a role in spreading best practice, but we need to do that as well, and the CQC report—and the fact that we are undertaking these reviews so transparently—will help us to do it.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Today’s report lays bare the problems that are at the heart of the Government’s short-sighted and incoherent approach to dealing with mental health issues. The CQC has found the system to be “under considerable pressure”, with no improvement in the areas of concern raised in previous reports.

Rather than taking a preventive approach to mental health treatment, the Government have made real-terms funding cuts which mean that more people are at risk of being detained and fewer detentions are being prevented. Crucially, those cuts are causing less restrictive alternatives for the community to be removed at the same time as the reductions in the number of beds for admissions. As the report tells us, the number of detentions under the Mental Health Act 1983 has risen by 36% since 2010, and between 2015 and 2016 it rose by more than 5,000. Will the Minister note that between 2000 and 2009 rates of detention fell, largely owing to investment in community services by the last Labour Government?

Recent research by the Royal College of Psychiatrists showed that mental health services have less money to spend on patient care in real terms than they did in 2012, and more than a quarter of clinical commissioning groups underspent their mental health budgets last year. The Government make many claims about the funds that they have pledged to mental health services—as the Minister has today—but it is clear that the money is not reaching the frontline. The CQC thinks that reform of mental health legislation on its own will not reduce the rate of detention, and reductions in mental health beds and community services are clearly contributing to the rise in the number of detentions. Is it not time to increase funding for mental health, and to ring-fence mental health budgets?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I repeat that we have increased mental health spending by £11.6 billion. The hon. Lady suggested that a quarter of CCGs are spending less than

their allocations on mental health, but that is not the figure that I have. We believe that 85% of CCGs have increased their mental health expenditure in excess of their allocations, which does not chime with what she said about community services. It may give her some reassurance to know that from next year, NHS England will ensure that the mental health investment standard forms part of its planning guidance. [Interruption.] The hon. Lady says “Next year”, but, as I have said, 85% of CCGs are already meeting the standard, and those that are not are experiencing intervention from NHS England. We are satisfied that the 85%—and it will be 100% next year—are investing more in mental health services beyond their allocations.

I agree with the hon. Lady, and indeed with the CQC report, that the review of the Mental Health Act is not the entire answer. That is the reason for the CQC’s annual inspections, and we will act on its recommendations, but central to the work that Sir Simon Wessely is leading is identifying non-legislative action that we can take in order to make the system work better, and we are involved in many cross-Government initiatives that will enable us to do exactly that.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The report also concludes that the number of mental health wards without ready access to GPs has fallen from 25% in 2013-14 to just 7% now. Is that not welcome news, and another step in the right direction?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. He has highlighted both the reason why we tasked the CQC with conducting annual inspections and an instance in which, having been given a conclusion and a set of recommendations, we have delivered, and we will do the same in respect of this report.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The report makes clear the need for a major shift in focus that will place patients at the centre of their care. What is required is a human rights approach in which the least restrictive option is adhered to. Detention must be the last resort.

A key issue is that patients feel invisible in the present system. Will the Minister go to the frontline? Will she visit the hospitals, speak to the staff about resourcing, and speak to the patients and the carers who are in, and have been through, the system? Will she hold the focus groups that are so badly needed with patients and carers to ensure that the system is overhauled and their voices are heard?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The ethos that the hon. Lady has outlined is very much the one that is being proposed by Sir Simon Wessely, which is why he is organising round tables, but I assure her that I am visiting services at the frontline as well. At the core of the point that she has made is the issue of a rights-centred approach for mental health patients, and that too is at the centre of Sir Simon’s inquiry. Patients need to be empowered to ensure that they receive the right treatment. Central to that is the whole issue of consent, which is something that very much concerns me, and not just in the context of mental health. We may be able to take the lessons from Sir Simon Wessely’s review and apply them elsewhere in the NHS.

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): Does the Minister agree that a better laydown of mental health services, involving crisis houses and step-down facilities, might end the need for people to be admitted to acute mental health facilities in the first place, or else support them immediately after their discharge? Will she join me in encouraging the Somerset CCG to ensure that such facilities are available in that county as well?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend reached the nub of the issue in that final point. Commissioning is a matter for local commissioning groups. However, through the CQC report, the work that we are doing through the mental health investment standard and the scrutiny applied by NHS England, we are trying to ensure that there is a consistent application of good-quality services around the country. We find some centres of excellence and some areas in which the service is less patchy, but when it is less good it obviously leads to worse outcomes. We are determined to do our best to promote the best possible services throughout the country.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome the Government's outlawing of the use of police cells for those experiencing a mental health crisis, and I do not question the Minister's commitment to improving the service, but the system is fragmented. There have been local authority cuts, including cuts in community services. The Health and Social Care Act 2012 leaves local commissioners to decide where the money goes, which has led to a confusing local picture and fragmentation. Do we not need to give people clear pathways out of hospital, and to ensure not only that the money goes to the right places, but that individuals know their rights and that local agencies know their responsibilities?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Gentleman's point about people knowing their rights and providers and commissioners knowing their responsibilities is crucial to the whole issue, and I think it probably underlies the lack of parity of esteem hitherto. When it comes to the role of central Government, we want to continue to rely on local provision and local commissioning, but we also need to be clear about the standards of performance that people should be able to expect. We are being more transparent about where services are being delivered well and where they are being delivered less well, but I think the work that Sir Simon Wessely is doing will shine a light on exactly that, and will enable us to engage in a much more meaningful debate about what is appropriate.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Does the Minister agree that involving more patients in determining their own care packages and giving them more control over their own treatment is part of the treatment itself?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I totally agree. Feeling empowered and in control of one's own care is quite a big part of the journey towards getting better. We are very concerned that we are still finding cases in which people are being detained under the Mental Health Act without being properly apprised of their rights under the Act, and without the support of advocates to represent them. Dealing with that is very much a priority as we drive improvement forward.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): More than half of women with mental health problems have experienced violence or abuse, so may I ask the Minister what reforms will be made to the support available to women with mental health difficulties, particularly to reflect women's experience of abuse in coercive or controlling relationships?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Lady raises an issue that is close to my heart. In my opening statement I highlighted the discrimination faced by black people in detention, but I could just as easily highlight the discrimination faced by women. As she says, if they become victims of domestic abuse or coercive relationships, they often face mental health challenges as a result, and they are more likely to be detained in those circumstances. I co-chair the women's mental health taskforce with Katharine Sacks-Jones from Agenda, and towards the end of the year we are looking to bring forward concrete actions to tackle exactly this kind of discrimination and make mental health services more responsive for women.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): As a doctor, I know how carefully doctors and other health professionals consider individuals before resorting to detention under the Mental Health Act. Does the increase in detentions under the Act reflect a general increase in mental health problems in the population, or can it be better explained by a greater proportion of people becoming so unwell that they need to be detained in order to support their care? What research is the Minister doing to determine which is the better explanation, and to ensure that we identify those people who are going to become severely ill in time to treat them?

Jackie Doyle-Price: Clearly, if we can determine the causes of the increase in mental health detention, that will become part of the toolkit that we use to tackle the issue. This is one of the things that we are asking Sir Simon Wessely to look at. There are anecdotal examples of why this might be happening, but the fact that we are seeing higher rates of detention among the black community and among women raises some interesting questions that will bear further examination. I recognise my hon. Friend's point completely. Good medical practitioners will use detention under the Mental Health Act only as a last resort, and we must ensure that that good practice is spread as far as possible.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): An acute mental health facility in my constituency has been forced to close because refurbishment would be too expensive, and patients are forced to travel a long way outside Bath. Is not a local facility much better suited to treating mental health problems than a facility that is many miles away, particularly because carers are a long way away as well?

Jackie Doyle-Price: Generally, I would say that local facilities were better, but there is also a tension between a local facility and a good facility. It is better that patients should get the best possible support rather than the closest possible support to them. That is a balancing act, and it is something that needs to be determined by local commissioners.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is absolutely essential that every one of us should challenge the system to give more, but could we also talk up progress where it has been made? The Sussex partnership has had a difficult past, but it has gone from being rated as requiring improvement to being rated as good, and one of its categories has been rated as outstanding. Can we praise the staff who are doing things well?

Jackie Doyle-Price: We absolutely should do that. I often think that when we are challenging each other in this place about things that are poor, we end up talking our services down, but it remains the case that the NHS is the best health service in the world, and we should always celebrate that fact. Also, the fact that we are putting mental health services under such scrutiny is in itself driving an improvement in performance, because, as we all know, sunlight is the best disinfectant.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that response, the CQC says that it has seen limited or no improvement in the key concerns that it has raised in previous years. The problems are long-standing and they have been raised by the quality regulator in previous reports to Parliament. Does the Minister not understand, when she tries to tell us that sunlight is the best disinfectant, that all we are seeing in our mental health services right now is clouds?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I would say to the hon. Lady that this report represents sunlight, not clouds. It is very transparent, and these are exactly the things that I will be holding myself and NHS England to deliver to address these points.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): It is very worrying to hear the CQC's judgment that there has been limited or no improvement, especially relating to the failure to involve patients in planning their care. The Government's review of the Mental Health Act is therefore timely, and it rightly considers evidence from people who have experienced being sectioned. The report mentions significant variation in performance. Will my hon. Friend be looking into the performance of specific organisations? Can we have more transparency about the failures, down to specific organisation level? What steps are being taken to intervene earlier and to care for people better in order to avert crises and reduce the need for sectioning in the first place?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend will be aware that, in addition to this annual review of how the Act operates, the CQC is also involved in inspections at individual provider level. Those institutions that are not performing to the standards that we expect are under close scrutiny by the CQC. In fact, I have had exchanges on the Floor of the House about some of them. I repeat my point about the spirit in which we embrace the challenges offered in the report. We have asked the CQC to undertake this annual report precisely so that we can ensure that the Mental Health Act is operating properly, and I actually welcome its frankness. I do not run away from the criticisms in the report, because it highlights exactly where we need to take action.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): If everything in the garden is lovely for mentally ill people, why am I constantly told by people in my constituency that another

Government Department—namely, the Department for Work and Pensions—is getting loads of people who are mentally ill to be reassessed, having been out of work for several years in some cases? If the Government want to help mentally ill people, somebody should tell the DWP to stop sending these mentally sick people for reassessment.

Jackie Doyle-Price: The first thing I would say to the hon. Gentleman is that I am not pretending that everything is rosy. One of the reasons we are making this such a priority is precisely because it is not, and we are determined to deliver improvement. He mentions the DWP, but I do not think that we should write people with mental illness off and say that they can never work again. It is in that spirit that we are working with the DWP to look at where we can help people, through person-centred interventions, to get back into work if they are able to do so. That is exactly what we are doing, and I hope that it will become very successful.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Obviously, the CQC report will help to inform a lot of ongoing Government work. With that in mind, will the Minister assure the House that Sir Simon Wessely's review will look at the concerns of people from ethnic minority communities, who have particular issues with detention at the moment?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. The increased prevalence of people with a black background being detained is very much part of Sir Simon's review.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Is the Minister also aware of the CQC report out today that rates as inadequate the child and adolescent mental health services in the Birmingham Women's and Children's NHS Foundation Trust? That is partly because of its vacancy rate of 27%, which the report says has

"impacted directly upon patient care resulting in poor patient handovers, cancellation of appointments, increasing waiting lists, patients waiting allocation of care coordinators, inconsistent care and low staff morale."

Does not this indicate that, contrary to what she says, mental health services are not getting the resources they need, either in Birmingham or anywhere else?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I was not aware of that report, but the hon. Gentleman highlights the positive influence of CQC inspection. He has highlighted a provider for which things are not going so well, and that will enable an intervention to be made through the CQC to improve performance. In the meantime, the local commissioners in Birmingham can buy services from other providers.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): My hon. Friend the Minister is right to highlight some of the concerning figures in this report, but there are some encouraging ones too, and does she agree that those who get a mental health problem in the United Kingdom today have a higher chance of being diagnosed, treated and making a recovery than ever before in our history, and that this is largely due to the brilliant staff up and down this country in tackling this fight?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I completely agree with my hon. Friend: they are better than they ever have been, but that does not mean we cannot do better, and we must strive to do better.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The mind and the brain are intimately associated, and I heard a horrible story this morning of a man who, after having been in and out of prison and in the criminal justice system and in and out of mental health institutions throughout his life, only really discovered at the age of 44 that many of his problems had originated from a traumatic brain injury at the age of 17. If he had been properly treated then, and had the rehabilitation that is unfortunately not available to so many people today, he would not have been through all of this round of problems. So will the Minister make sure that we get proper rehabilitation services for everybody who has a traumatic brain injury?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Gentleman gives a very powerful example, which highlights better than any other we have heard today the challenge we face. Not only was that person failed at the time of having his brain injury, but it was not subsequently picked up as he went through the criminal justice system, and I often say that we can deal with one weak link in a chain of events, but when we have a succession of them, things go horribly wrong. It is very much top of my list to make sure we have better integration of services between health and the criminal justice system, to pick up precisely those situations.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister rightly said that police cells are inappropriate places to detain people with mental health breakdown, but she and the Government must address the fact that the police have a duty of care to people in mental health crisis until they can deliver them to qualified mental health professionals. The right facilities are simply not available everywhere, and we must make sure that they are, both for the police and, more importantly, for people in the middle of a health crisis.

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We have seen impressive and rapid rates of decline in the detention of patients in police cells, and I congratulate police forces and police and crime commissioners for helping to achieve that, but he is right that we need to make sure that, when people are taken to places of safety, suitable facilities are available for them.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Yesterday some of us were present when Esther Rantzen told us that calls to Childline from children with suicidal feelings had risen in 10 years from virtually none to over 22,000 last year, and the CQC report yesterday found that young patients are not receiving the mental health care they need. So can the Minister explain why only 7% of the overall mental health budget is spent on children, when children make up 20% of the population and 50% of enduring mental health conditions materialise by the age of 14?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Lady is right to highlight that point, and that is exactly why we have brought forward the children and young persons Green Paper, recognising that the earlier we intervene, the more likely we are to delay and prevent any long-term mental health issues. We are working with the Department for Education, and we are going to be rolling out 8,000 mental health support staff to work in schools to identify precisely that early intervention. The point the hon. Lady makes about Childline raises more questions about why the number of such calls have increased, and we need to do more to understand that. We know some of the social causes that lead to poor mental health, such as domestic violence and other kinds of trauma; they have been with us for a long time. We also need to look at whether there are other environmental factors contributing to that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I say very plainly to the Minister that nobody on this side of the House is criticising the staff in the mental health services; we very much support them, but we need more of them and they need to be better resourced. Can she explain why we in West Yorkshire are one of only six authorities who have had year-on-year cuts for five years? We have now lost £20.4 million from the service. May I add that many people on the autism spectrum also find that they are in need of mental health services and they feel these cuts particularly?

Jackie Doyle-Price: As I have said, we have increased the amount of funding for mental health. That is separate, of course, to the commissioning decisions at local level by local authorities, who also have a role to play in this, as the hon. Gentleman knows. I am very conscious of the needs of people on the autism spectrum. We must give that support, and the things we are doing in terms of improving provision in schools will help identify people who are struggling with that. Planning for the future is great, but we are where we are now, and I join the hon. Gentleman in wholeheartedly congratulating staff up and down the country on their efforts in delivering a good service.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): This CQC report shows that the bad old days of poor mental health care are creeping back: insufficient staff, a doubling of restriction, and a third of patients not involved in their care plan. Why do the Government continue to fail people with mental health conditions, and when do they expect all mental health services to be made safe—the most basic of requirements?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I disagree profoundly with the hon. Gentleman. This report shows that patients have increased access to advocates, that more attention is paid to the physical health of people with mental health treatment, and that there is better planning for aftercare and discharge, but we are being honest: we still need to do better, and I expect Members to hold me to the findings highlighted in the report.

Office for Students

1.16 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Education to make a statement on the appointment of the board of the Office for Students.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): The Office for Students, which will be operational from April, is the biggest regulatory change to higher education in 30 years. It will run a new regulatory framework that will, for the first time, put the interests of students at the heart of higher education regulation. It will focus relentlessly on student choice and value for money and ensure that the concerns of all students in higher education in England are heard in the corridors of power. It has a wide-ranging remit and powers to deliver for students.

The OfS is ably led by Sir Michael Barber, who has a long record of working for Labour and Conservative Administrations, including advising a Labour Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Education, and he has also been a Labour parliamentary candidate. Nicola Dandridge, the chief executive, has a background from Universities UK and as an equalities lawyer. They are supported by a board of 12 further members with a wide range of talents and from different backgrounds, including senior leaders in higher education, graduate employers, and legal and regulatory experts, as well as a student representative. I am particularly pleased that Chris Millward, the director of fair access, sits on the board, putting widening participation and fair access at the heart of the organisation. Toby Young would have been just one non-executive member of this board.

The board will put quality of teaching, student choice and value for money at the heart of what it does. The commissioner for public appointments advised the Department on 11 January, two days after my appointment, that he was looking into the appointments processes for the OfS, and the Department has provided him with the relevant paperwork. We are grateful to him for forwarding his report yesterday. His report recognises the good intentions of Ministers and officials, and that the advisory panel did judge candidates on a fair and impartial basis. That said, we note his findings and will carefully and seriously consider his recommendations.

The commissioner raises important points with regard to due diligence in public appointments. We have already accepted that in the case of Toby Young the due diligence fell short of what was required, and therefore the Department has already reviewed its due diligence processes and will seriously consider the further advice from the commissioner.

The commissioner has rightly observed that it was wrong not to have made a formal request to him regarding the approach the Department took in appointing the student experience role, and therefore this was in breach of paragraph 3.3 of the governance code. We should have clarified in the announcement that it was an interim position, although the candidate had been informed of this, as had all failing candidates in the process. I understand that informal contact was made, but I accept that this should have been formalised with the commissioner. Without this formal advice and under pressure to make an appointment by 1 January, the announcement was not made in line with the commissioner's expectations.

I can confirm that in line with the commissioner's steer, we will shortly be launching a recruitment campaign for a permanent student experience representative, and we intend to appoint before the end of June this year. We are glad that the commissioner agrees that the incumbent in the interim role, Ruth Carlson, is free to apply. I want to put it on record that she is doing an important job, and I extend my thanks to her for agreeing to accept the interim appointment.

There are lessons to be learned here, and we will learn them. I will write to the commissioner shortly with an initial response to his findings and the next steps we will take with regard to his recommendations.

Angela Rayner: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

Weeks ago, the Government told this House that the process was

"a fair and open competition"

and

"in accordance with the code of practice".—[*Official Report*, 8 January 2018; Vol. 634, c. 42-52.]

But the commissioner has found that this is not the case. One candidate was rejected on the basis of their past public statements. Incredibly, this was not Toby Young; it was the student representative, rejected due to the desire of

"ministers and special advisers not to appoint someone with close links to student unions",

as the report notes. Can the Minister tell us why being elected by students makes someone unsuitable to represent them? How could the then Minister tell us that it was not "reasonable" to vet social media, when that was done for the student representatives?

The report found that the appointment was influenced by special advisers at No. 10, and not by the panel. The commissioner concludes that, as the Minister said, the code was broken. Is the Cabinet Secretary now investigating that breach? Is the Minister's predecessor really still suitable for ministerial office given the findings of this report? Does the Minister believe that after this level of interference we can possibly call the Office for Students an independent body?

The report also notes that an all-male appointment panel was used twice. Will the Minister end that practice immediately? The commissioner made a number of other recommendations. Will the Minister tell us which of the lessons that he talks about his Department will take on board? He has a simple choice: learn the lessons, or make the same mistakes again. What will it be?

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Lady asked a number of questions that I will take in turn. Her first question relates to having a National Union of Students rep on the board. As she will know, in addition to having a senior representative on the board, there is also a student panel. I met the student panel within, I think, the first week of my being appointed. [HON. MEMBERS: "Answer."] I am giving an answer. I spoke to the student panel directly; it is doing a great job. There is an NUS representative on the student panel, but there is nothing to say that the person on the board has to be an NUS representative, given that the board has not been constructed to be the place where delegates of represented bodies congregate. The NUS can therefore influence what is happening in the Office for Students.

On the wider question of social media and social media vetting, clearly the social media vetting of Toby Young was not as extensive as it could have been, also given that there were 40,000 tweets.

With regard to the influence of special advisers, Members across this House will know that the way government works is that civil servants and advisers advise but ultimately Ministers decide. In making a decision, Ministers make a judgment call, especially in recruitment decisions. The judgment call in this case was that, having considered the advice from the advisory panel that had looked at the candidates and all the information, none of the three student representatives put forward was suitable. Therefore, because someone needed to be in place by 1 January, an interim member was appointed with a view to reopening the competition later on.

I take the hon. Lady's point about the all-male appointment panel. I think that an attempt was made to make sure that the panel was more representative, but, for whatever reason, someone could not be available. *[Interruption.]* The key thing, if the hon. Lady will stop commenting from a sedentary position, is that three out of the five members who were eventually appointed were women. Sometimes, in these situations, it is as important to look at the outcomes as the process.

As we look at the process and the lessons that we have to learn, it is important that we do not forget the ground-breaking role that the Office for Students will play in empowering students and championing them—something that this Conservative Government have delivered that was never delivered by Labour.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I welcome the Minister's comments, but may I ask him about a wider issue? What I do not understand about the board of the Office for Students is that, given what the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have said about technical education and further education and the link to higher education, why on earth does the Office for Students not have serious individuals from the further education sector and from the apprenticeships sector, many of whom are students doing degree apprenticeships?

Mr Gyimah: The Chairman of the Education Committee asks a very important question. As he will be aware, however, this is a regulatory body for the higher education sector. He will also be aware that the panel that has been appointed for the higher education review includes some very strong representation from the further education sector. Baroness Wolf of Dulwich is very well known for her work in her reviews of further education, and Beverley Robinson is the principal of an FE college. However, this particular regulatory body is for the higher education sector.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): This report confirms what we all knew—that the appointment of Toby Young, someone who expressed many misogynistic and prejudiced views, should never have happened and could only have happened due to Government meddling. During the previous UQ on this matter, the Universities Minister defended the appointment, stating that it was “made in line with the Commissioner for Public Appointment's code of practice, and Mr Young was appointed following a fair and open competition.”—*[Official Report, 8 January 2018; Vol. 634, c. 42.]*

Does the code of practice therefore include a recommendation to tip off a friend about open positions? If the Education Secretary expressed concern, who is actually in charge of the Department? Is it appropriate that the Universities Minister has simply been shuffled to another Department, given that the current Minister has confirmed that there was a breach of the governance code? Given the stated disparities in process and ministerial input for the candidates and the two different positions for consideration, what reviews are being taken across the entire Government, including on the role of special advisers? What is going to be done to eliminate the blasé crony appointment system that the Government have been operating?

Mr Gyimah: Just to be clear about what the commissioner has said in relation to the code, he cited a breach in relation to paragraph 3.3, which is a particular reference to the failure to consult formally—there was an informal consultation—before the announcement of the appointment of the student representative. As I said in my opening remarks, there is a lot to be learned here. The Cabinet Office public appointments team, who own the governance code, are working with the Department on the commissioner's findings and will be writing to the commissioner about how we intend to proceed.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Is the National Union of Students doing enough to counter the rise of extremism and radicalisation on campuses? What powers does the Office for Students have in that area?

Mr Gyimah: The first part of my hon. Friend's question should be directed at the National Union of Students, but he is right that the Office for Students has a wide-ranging remit when it comes to promoting—not simply tolerating—free speech in our universities. Under the current law, the Education (No. 2) Act 1986, the only recourse if someone's free speech has been infringed at a university is for them to go to court. The Office for Students can investigate, promote culture and, in extremis, fine universities that are not taking seriously their responsibilities on free speech. That is a huge development.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): This report is absolutely damning, particularly in relation to the previous Universities Minister and his role in this appointment. Are there not very serious questions that the previous Minister should be answering to this House about his claim that it was not appropriate and not proper to do due diligence on candidates—he made that statement from the Dispatch Box—when his Department, and he himself, ordered that very same due diligence against a candidate he did not want to appoint? When is he going to come to this House to apologise, at the very least, else further action be taken?

Mr Gyimah: The same due diligence was carried out by the same advisers on all the candidates. As I said in response to an earlier question, the due diligence could have been more comprehensive and extensive.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Throughout the general debate we have in this country on higher education, there is typically a focus—perhaps understandably—on finance. Does the Minister agree that we need to be equally focused on outcomes and on

[James Cartledge]

the quality of the degrees that graduates obtain? Can he assure me that the inception of the Office for Students will help us to achieve that focus? What really matters is that our graduates have the best quality education.

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend makes the important point that, for many students at university today, the important thing is that they are getting value for money, that they get what they pay for, and that their degrees are worth the paper they are written on. That is what the Office for Students, which this Government created, is set up to do. There are lessons to be learned but, as we have these discussions, it is important that, in the big picture, we do not forget what the Office for Students can do and what it can deliver for our students.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Toby Young believed in eugenics. He made terrible remarks about disabled people. He made awful remarks about women. This is a man who the Minister's predecessor thought was fine to be on the board of the Office for Students. What confidence should working-class young people, under-represented groups and ethnic minorities across this country have in the Office for Students if the Minister who did this cannot come to the Dispatch Box to apologise or step down?

Mr Gyimah: The right hon. Gentleman is someone who likes to have perspective and a balanced view on things, and he will know that Toby Young also set up a free school mainly to give disadvantaged people in some of the poorest parts of our country the excellent education they deserve so that they can improve their prospects in life. Yes, there are issues here that are questionable, but we always need a sense of perspective when we consider such things. Some of the things that Toby Young did are admirable and laudable, and those are the reasons why he was considered to be a serious candidate for the job.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I beg the Minister to stick to the point. We do not live in some Soviet or Putin-style kleptocracy; we are supposed to be living in a modern parliamentary democracy in which public appointments are done properly, with scrutiny and transparency. That certainly has not been the case with this appointment, and it certainly was not the case the other day when the proposed chair of the Charity Commission was unanimously rejected by the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. Why cannot the Government get this right?

Mr Gyimah: It is precisely because we live in a well-functioning democracy that we are here and you—not you, Mr Speaker, but the hon. Gentleman—can ask those questions. For perspective, there were 15 appointments to the board. There are question marks, quite rightly, over the appointment of Toby Young and the process for the student representative, but 15 candidates were appointed to the board.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is a sign of a well-functioning democracy that you are here, too, Mr Speaker. Does the Minister agree it is important

that the Office for Students has the requisite skills and resources to be able to play its role in tackling radicalisation on our campuses?

Mr Gyimah: Absolutely. It is important that the Office for Students has the relevant skills, and also the laser-like focus and the teeth to do something about this. I am glad that we will have a regulatory body with the teeth to do that very effectively.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I start by thanking all Members who signed the letter to the commissioner for public appointments asking for his investigation. I also thank him for yesterday's response.

Despite what the Minister says, the report clearly shows a lack of proper process in the appointment of Toby Young and in relation to the student appointment. We need to hear a lot more from the Minister about how lessons will be learned. The commissioner did not look at the person specification, which required candidates to want to contribute to the delivery of the Government's priorities—not that they should have experience of higher education—but that politicised the process right from the outset. What will the Minister do to address that and to get the person specification checked?

Mr Gyimah: If the Government were interested in politicising the process in our favour, we would not have a former Labour parliamentary candidate as the chair of the Office for Students—he has advised Labour Prime Ministers and Conservative Ministers. All the candidates had to declare their political affiliation, which was subsequently published.

In the case of Ruth Carlson, for example, there are no discernible political views, but she is very well qualified. She is a student ambassador at the University of Surrey. She was also her second-year course representative and a member of the scholarship committee. When we think of these representatives, we should not always default to the lobby organisations or to people we think fit the bill; we should cast the net wider to bring in the widest possible experience and fresh thinking.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Minister has the audacity to talk about casting the net wider when another old Etonian mate of his friends has been appointed through a process that was utterly corrupt. The report says that the key question is whether each candidate was treated fairly and impartially; the answer here is no.

The Government are in absolute disarray, and the Minister is making the situation worse. He says that he is willing to learn lessons. Will he at least confront the fact that this process is not fit for a modern nation like ours?

Mr Gyimah: I stopped listening when the hon. Gentleman said that Toby Young is an old Etonian—I do not believe he ever was.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Toby Young is the chief executive officer of the New Schools Network, which has been awarded a series of Government grants to provide advice to people who are opening a free school. In the light of the blatant cronyism we have learned about as a result of the report, do the Government now intend to review those contracts and determine whether due process was followed there?

Mr Gyimah: The Department is looking at options for support around the New Schools Network. An announcement will be made in due course.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Hard cases make bad law. It is absolutely clear that the previous Minister made an outrageous, dogma-driven choice in Toby Young and, as the current Minister has admitted, clearly failed to undertake due diligence. I urge that we should not allow that to lead to the abdication of responsibility for appointments to a self-perpetuating quangocracy that looks after the great and the good.

Mr Gyimah: I reject the idea that there is a self-perpetuating quangocracy here. I have made it absolutely clear that Toby Young's experience of setting up a free school and his commitment to social mobility meant that there were strong reasons for him to be a candidate. Of course, subsequent information has revealed that he should not have been appointed, which is why he is no longer on the board. We need to look clearly at how these processes work in the future. We will work with the commissioner and we will make sure we implement the recommendations in a way that makes the process more effective next time around. On the student representative, we have someone who is doing a sterling job and has the confidence of the chair. So perspective is needed—this is not cronyism. One appointment should not have happened and that person is no longer on the board, and we will learn lessons as far as the process is concerned.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister on getting his alibi in early during his response to the statement. I should not have been surprised, because on 15 January, when he answered my written question, he unusually provided quite a lot of information about this appointment, which showed that he had looked under the stone and not liked at all what he had seen. Why is the Minister who was responsible for the appointment not being held to account for his actions under the ministerial code of conduct?

Mr Gyimah: As I have said, we will be responding to the comments of the commissioner for public appointments. The Department is working with the Cabinet Office, and we will do what the commissioner has recommended we do to make sure that this process works better in future.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): When the Government are considering this, will they think about why the same level of due diligence was not applied to Toby Young? Was it Government and ministerial interference—yes or no?

Mr Gyimah: Ultimately, this is a departmental issue. The Department has taken responsibility and will act on the recommendations of the commissioner for public appointments.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The Minister rightly reminds us that this was a judgment call for the then Minister. Does this Minister think it was a sound judgment call to allow No. 10's political advisers to blacklist anybody with NUS involvement and then to appoint somebody who was a chum by not following any proper process? Was that a good judgment call by his predecessor?

Mr Gyimah: Every decision that any Minister makes involves a judgment—it is not a scientific process. Clearly, all the issues had been gone through, with the input of the advisory panel and civil servants, and everyone involved then came to a judgment. Clearly, in retrospect, Toby Young should not have been appointed, which is why he is not on the board. In terms of making sure the process works better, the Department, which has ultimate responsibility here, will make sure that we have a much more robust and stringent process next time.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): As chair of the all-party group on students, may I express concern about how the credibility of the Office for Students has been damaged by the then Minister's handling of these appointments? There is a legal requirement for one board member to have experience of representing students, yet it appears that Ministers have actually taken the best possible experience—involvement in a student union—as a reason to not make an appointment.

Mr Gyimah *indicated dissent.*

Paul Blomfield: I am sorry that the Minister shakes his head, because that is what the commissioner says in the report. Will he assure me that under the new process that he has indicated the Government will follow, involvement in a student union will not be a barrier to consideration?

Mr Gyimah: The reputation of the Office for Students has not been damaged by this. It has a board with 15 members. It is led by Sir Michael Barber, who is very well respected across the House, and Nicola Dandridge, who has a long and proven track record in higher education. Toby Young was going to be one non-executive board member. Of course experience of being involved in a student union is particularly important, which is why there is a member of the NUS on the student panel. As a Minister, I value students' views, which is why I have been on a tour to talk to students across the country. It is important that student unions have an input, but it is also important that so do all the other students who do not stand for election and are not politicians, but have views on public policy and how that has an impact on them. It is important to make sure that their voice is heard, too. That is what we are doing with the Office for Students and it is what I am doing as a Minister.

Points of Order

1.44 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I asked the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation whether the person specification for the board members of the Office for Students had been checked properly and if we could be assured it met the requirements of the code for public appointments. He did not address that issue, so I wonder whether you could give any advice as to how we can take it forward.

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order for the Chair. Whether it momentarily slipped the Minister's mind or for some other reason he chose to focus his remarks elsewhere, I do not know. The Minister is welcome to come to the Dispatch Box if he wishes, but he is not under any obligation to do so.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): It is not a point of order.

Mr Speaker: It is not a point of order, as the hon. Gentleman rightly says. If the hon. Lady wishes to go in hot pursuit of the Minister and to seek to engage him in conversation on this matter, conceivably even over a cup of tea, it is open to her to try, although it does not look as though the prospects of her succeeding today are high.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the Minister's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), he said that the same due diligence was carried out by the same advisers on all candidates. That is simply not true. Would the Minister like to correct the record, based on the commissioner's findings?

Mr Speaker: I am aware of the summary of the report, but I have not read the report. Again, this is not a point of order; it is a matter of debate. If the Minister wants to engage with this, he can briefly respond, but he is not obliged to do so—[*Interruption.*] It appears he does not wish to. What I would say to the shadow Secretary of State is that she has made her own point in her own way. As I said to somebody yesterday, she has done so with her usual force and alacrity. It is on the record and we are grateful to her.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I respect what you have just clarified, but what recourse does the House have regarding the former Universities Minister? I feel that he misled this House in his statement on 8 January, and the report by the commissioner has now clearly set out that it was a misleading statement. What recourse do we have regarding that Minister, who is not here today to answer?

Mr Speaker: I entirely understand what the hon. Lady is saying, but it is not right to accuse somebody of misleading the House, particularly when the Minister involved is not here. I think she probably wants to insert the word "inadvertently"—I think that would be safe.

Lucy Powell: Inadvertently.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. I understand her concern. The Minister in question no longer occupies this office—witness the fact that the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah) answered the urgent question, as he is now a Minister in the relevant Department and the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson) now serves in another capacity. My advice to the hon. Lady is that she should repair to the Table Office, which is a short distance from here, to consult it as to the means by which questions may be capable of being put to that Minister which might elicit a reply. If that course of action proves not to be fruitful, I suggest that she approaches me again, perhaps with notice, giving me an opportunity to reflect, because certainly I believe in the importance of holding Ministers to account for present and indeed past actions.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) *rose*—

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I will come to the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins)—we will save him for now. He can cook for a little longer.

Robert Halfon: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the Minister's gracious reply to me, he said that there should not be further education representation on the board of the Office for Students because it was about higher degrees. However, further education colleges actually do higher degrees. I just want to get that point on the record.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman has made his own point and it is a factual one. It is on the record and it can be shared, not only with all parliamentary colleagues, but, conceivably, with the masses in his constituency of Harlow.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I think I ought to take the hon. Member for Chesterfield first, so the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) can wait.

Toby Perkins: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In my question, I described Toby Young as an old Etonian. I am sure he has been called worse, and I could have used many other phrases, but apparently he was not educated there and so that should not be added to his charge sheet. Will you therefore allow me the opportunity to correct the record?

Mr Speaker: Yes, the hon. Gentleman has corrected the record, and I am grateful to him for his courtesy in doing so.

Kevin Brennan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to the point of order of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), if there are no other means by which the House could hold the former Universities Minister, the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), to account, is it still in order to table a motion to reduce his salary as a way of expressing the House's concern about that lack of accountability?

Mr Speaker: That has been an option deployed in the past—there are certainly precedents for it. The hon. Gentleman, who is a person of considerable perspicacity, will certainly know the route to the Table Office by now, as he entered the House in 2001. He may wish to make that journey and to inquire about the feasibility of such an approach, but that there are precedents for such an approach I am happy to confirm.

Access to Banking Services

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.50 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about access by customers, in particular those in rural areas, to banking services; to make provision for community banking hubs; to review access to banking services through the Post Office network; and for connected purposes.

In an otherwise fraught and divided political climate, few issues unify Opposition and Government Members from every corner of the British Isles as successfully as bank closures. In short, my Bill would: make it more difficult for banks to close branches; enable the establishment of community banking hubs; and ascertain whether the Post Office has the necessary resources truly to deliver its banking offer.

The insidious decline of the bank branch network is a long-standing phenomenon. The number of branches has halved since 1988, with more than 800 closing in 2017 and a further 250 earmarked for closure this year. In too many instances, banks are abandoning communities that have supported them for generations. That is certainly the case in Ceredigion, where bank after bank has decided to vacate.

Ceredigion was home to some of the first banking networks at the turn of the 19th century, but the 21st century has seen the seaside towns of Aberaeron and New Quay lose branches and the old market towns of Llandysul and Tregaron inherit the unenviable accreditation of being towns without any banks at all. The most recent round of branch closures includes those in the towns of Cardigan and Lampeter. There is no solace to be found in the tragic irony that these rural communities, home to some of the earliest banking networks, could soon be deprived of any at all.

The experience I have described is replicated throughout the UK. The concerns that arise from it do not in any way reflect a romantic fixation with the past or a Luddite reluctance to acknowledge that the way we bank is changing; rather, the transformation of both personal and business banking is developing in such a way as to leave some communities behind. Yes, the use of cash may well have fallen by a fifth in the past decade, and I do not doubt that the number of branch visits has fallen by a third since 2011, but we should not turn a blind eye to the fact that for many individuals and businesses, particularly those in rural or deprived areas, access to banking facilities over the counter is still crucial.

Losing over-the-counter access has a devastating impact on the local community. Too often, online banking is still a hope for the future, rather than a realistic alternative for the present. Indeed, it is often the case that those areas that have suffered branch closures also receive among the poorest broadband services. That is true of Ceredigion, where almost half of all properties do not have “decent broadband” by Ofcom standards. Without access to physical branches, and in the absence of sufficient broadband, people are simply unable to conduct their day-to-day banking online, let alone change their accounts, no matter how seamless or intuitive banks make their websites.

[Ben Lake]

Compounding the lack of digital connectivity is the fact that public transport links are often poorer in rural areas, making that 20-mile or 30-mile journey to the nearest branch even more challenging, especially for the elderly, those with disabilities, and those on low incomes.

The impact of branch closures on small businesses and the local economy is also significant. As the Association of Convenience Stores has noted, 73% of rural customers still pay by cash. A 2016 Move Your Money report found that, apart from the practical difficulties that branch closures cause for the operation of small businesses, they also have a severe impact on local business finance. Bank branch closures dampen small and medium-sized enterprise lending growth by an average of 63%, and postcodes that have lost the last bank in town lose almost £1.6 million-worth of lending over the course of a year. The current trend of branch closures has a devastating impact on individuals, businesses and communities, which the Bill seeks to mitigate.

In all fairness, some banks are beginning to improve the way in which they support communities following the announcement of a branch closure. This is partly a result of the access to banking protocol and its more recent, reinforced iteration, the access to banking standard. Although some banks will adhere to, or even go beyond, the requirements detailed in the standard, it needs to be strengthened further if it is to stem the tide of closures. My Bill would build on the existing access to banking standard and place it on a statutory footing, so that customers of every bank can be assured of best practice.

Currently, communities understandably feel disconnected from the development of local bank networks, so the Bill would require banks to work more closely with the local community prior to a decision to close a branch, as part of their pre-closure assessments, and to determine what options, other than complete closure, are possible. This work would have to include proper consultation with communities so that the full impact of a closure was clear, and alternative options would have to be identified before a final decision was made.

Greater emphasis would be placed on how customers could access cash in rural areas—for example, by taking account of their proximity to a post office, another bank branch or a cash machine—and the distances would be measured in travel time rather than geographical distance. Furthermore, local transport, in addition to broadband infrastructure, would be considered as part of the process. Where the provision is so poor as to exclude customers from accessing an equivalent service, banks would need to work with others to improve the situation and, if necessary, funds should be made available for broadband schemes and skills training.

Consideration would also be given to the wider impact of a closure on a community, including the fact that a branch is often not only the last bank in town but the last service in town. In such circumstances, a bank should be precluded from closing the branch unless an equivalent alternative can be secured, or it should pay a levy to fund the provision of community banking.

To give banks and communities a greater range of options than the closure of a branch, the Bill would provide for establishing community banking hubs. In essence, such an option would enable banks to pool

their resources to provide centres in which they could all be accessed by their customers. In other words, the Bill would help banks to co-locate, instead of completely vacating our rural communities. Although there is no specific regulation to prevent banks from sharing branches, such banking hubs would require significant co-operation and a fair amount of trust, in order to overcome their practical and commercial challenges. To address those challenges and inspire collaboration between banks, the Bill would encourage the creation of regional forums, which would open an avenue for banks to discuss ways in which they can work together to maintain a physical presence in communities.

The role of the Post Office, particularly its banking offer, has been referred to in many of the recent debates about community banking. The services available through its network are certainly vast, and in many instances they have served to fill the gap left by the closure of the last bank in town. If post offices are to assume this ever-growing responsibility, it stands to reason that resources will be required to ensure that staff are trained in banking services or that post offices employ those made redundant by bank closures.

Furthermore, many post offices require physical adjustments—from improving accessibility to the installation of private meeting rooms to discuss personal finance matters—to make them appropriate centres for greater banking services. Funds should be forthcoming from either central Government or the vacating banks to support such adjustments. If the Government intend the Post Office to fill the vacuum left by retail banks, they must stand ready to allocate the resources needed for it truly to flourish in this new role. Before that, a review is required to ascertain what precisely is needed. The Bill would provide for such a review.

Taken together, the provisions in the Bill would stem the tide of branch closures. It would ensure that banks give full consideration to the broader impact that closure has on communities, offer an alternative way for banks to maintain their physical presence in rural areas, and determine what support will be needed if the Post Office is to assume an even greater role.

As Professor Griggs noted in his review of the access to banking protocol, we should not wait for branches to close before

“addressing the issues that some have with these changes”.

Rather, banks and the public sector should work proactively to find alternatives

“to help all of us feel that we are part of this journey, and not excluded from it.”

I would be glad to have the opportunity to consider other aspects of this issue, should the House give me leave to bring in the Bill, which I commend to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Ben Lake, Liz Saville Roberts, Jonathan Edwards, Hywel Williams, David Linden, Brendan O'Hara, Mr William Wragg, Stephen Kerr, Ruth Smeeth, Martin Whitfield, Caroline Lucas and Jamie Stone present the Bill.

Ben Lake accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed (Bill 169).

Estimates Day

[2ND ALLOTTED DAY]

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES 2017-18

MINISTRY OF HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Homelessness

[Relevant Documents: Oral evidence taken before the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee on 27 November 2017, on the Homelessness Reduction Act, HC 554; Fifth Report of the Communities and Local Government Committee, Session 2016-17, the draft Homelessness Reduction Bill, HC 635, and the Government response, Cm 9443; Third Report of the Communities and Local Government Committee, Session 2016-17, Homelessness, HC 40; Eleventh Report of the Committee of Public Accounts, Homeless households, HC 462; Sixty-third Report of the Committee of Public Accounts, Session 2016-17, Housing: State of the Nation, HC 958; and Written evidence to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, on the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Supplementary Estimates 2017-18, reported to the House and published on 21 February 2018.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I should inform colleagues that, following recommendations from the Procedure Committee, this year the subjects for the estimates debates have been chosen by the Backbench Business Committee, based on bids from Members. The subjects chosen by the Backbench Business Committee were then recommended to the Liaison Committee, which in turn, under Standing Order No.145, recommended them to the House, which agreed to them on 22 February. The first debate will be introduced by Layla Moran, who should speak for no more than 15 minutes, in accordance with the Standing Orders. Because so many Members wish to speak, after Layla Moran has introduced the debate I will impose a time limit of six minutes.

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018, for expenditure by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £296,942,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 808,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £484,352,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £1,618,448,000, be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(Wendy Morton.)

2.3 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a great pleasure to introduce this estimates day debate on the spending of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government as it relates to homelessness. I would like to start by thanking the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) for co-sponsoring the debate. I also thank colleagues on the Public Accounts Committee and the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local

Government Committee, all of whom supported our bid to the Backbench Business Committee. I am delighted that so many Members wish to speak.

I draw Members' attention to the reports of the Public Accounts Committee and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee that are listed on the Order Paper. It was a real eye-opener to work on the Public Accounts Committee as a lead member on that inquiry, alongside the hon. Member for Chichester and the Committee's Chair, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier). I will focus my remarks today on that report, which is well worth a read.

The Public Accounts Committee heard and read evidence from a wide range of witnesses. I would especially like to thank St Mungo's for hosting us and showing us its exemplary work, which led in large part to the questioning we went on to do. The report, which received widespread media coverage, made a number of recommendations on how the Government could more effectively co-ordinate and prioritise spending on tackling rough sleeping and helping all homeless households. These issues are of huge concern across the House and across the country, but they are of equal concern to very many members of our communities, especially on such a freezing day, in a week that is unusually cold.

In my constituency of Oxford West and Abingdon, residents regularly raise concerns about rough sleeping and provision for homeless people—it is the No. 1 issue at the moment. I pay tribute to the incredible work being done in my constituency, especially by Homeless Oxfordshire, formerly known as Oxford Homeless Pathways. It has told me that in Oxford alone it is reaching out to, on average, two new people a day who are seeking its help.

Recent news reports have highlighted a heavy-handed approach by Oxford City Council, with notices issued threatening homeless people with fines of up to £2,500 if they did not move their belongings. The treatment of homeless people in our city has sparked outrage from the public. There is now real determination, and not just in Oxfordshire but across the country, to ensure that we treat those who are sleeping rough with the dignity and respect they deserve.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that we should also be concerned about some of the campaigns that have arisen aimed at the "fake homeless," including one campaign in Devon that has led the police and Torbay Council to intervene because of the risk of vigilantism? Does she agree that, in the face of rising rough sleeping and homelessness, we should be taking a generous approach to those who are most vulnerable, not seeking to label them as fakes?

Layla Moran: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I completely agree that a compassionate approach is absolutely what is needed.

Following a campaign by Oxford University students, I was pleased to be able to introduce a private Member's Bill earlier this month aimed at repealing the archaic Vagrancy Act 1824, a Dickensian law that is no longer fit for purpose.

[Layla Moran]

Oxford is not alone in seeing an increase in the problem of homelessness. Anyone who has visited a town or city centre recently will know that rough sleeping is now at crisis levels. Indeed, the Public Accounts Committee concluded that homelessness is a national crisis, with the number of rough sleepers rising year on year since 2010, doubling to over 4,100 in 2016. Crisis estimates that the figure is now as high as 9,000, and possibly more. Last summer in England there were over 78,000 households in temporary accommodation—this is not just about rough sleeping—which is up by 65% since 2010. Then there are the hidden homeless: the sofa surfers or people staying temporarily with friends and family who escape national statistics on rough sleepers.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Is my hon. Friend as concerned as I am that youth homelessness is one of the largest factors contributing to those figures, due to the benefit cut for 18 to 21-year-olds? Is it not time we reintroduced those benefits?

Layla Moran: Yes, I agree. In fact, joined-up thinking between Departments is a theme that I will return to later in my speech.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that it is important to tackle homelessness before it happens? The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which will come into operation in April—I was proud to sit on the Committee that scrutinised it—will deal with this by alerting services of the risk 56 days before people become homeless, and indeed the Government are providing £73 million to help local authorities tackle this.

Layla Moran: I am indeed getting to that point, at which I will be very generous in my comments.

I am sure that hon. Members are aware of the scale of the problem. How can we not be, when we heard the story of the gentleman who died right on our doorstep in the underpass of Westminster tube station just a few weeks ago? It is clear that the House needs to take this issue much more seriously, and I am sure that many of our constituents would agree.

It is worth repeating some of the key statistics from the Public Accounts Committee's report. There has been a 134% increase in rough sleeping since 2011. The average life expectancy of a rough sleeper is only 47. People on the street are 17 times more likely to be the victims of violence than those in settled accommodation. Children in long-term temporary accommodation miss far more days of school, at an average of 55 days a year. The country is seeing record problems including record numbers of rough sleepers, and huge increases in the number of families living in temporary accommodation and in bed-and-breakfast accommodation, sometimes for two and a half years at a time. It has never been more important for this House to ensure that the Government are spending enough—and, critically, that they are spending wisely—to address this problem of national significance.

Having looked at the supplementary estimates—dare I say that I have not read them line by line?—it seems that the Ministry proposes an overall reduction of

£470 million in its resource budget. I would be grateful if the Minister told us what impact this is likely to have on homelessness. But this is not just about overall spending; it is also about how effectively the money is spent. The Public Accounts Committee has expressed concern over how effectively taxpayers' money is being used. There have been some welcome developments, including the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Southwark Council, one of the local authorities that serves my constituency, is a trailblazer for the Homelessness Reduction Act and has been much praised by the Minister's predecessor for its implementation work on the Act and its good prevention work. Within a matter of months, Southwark Council will have to issue redundancy notices to the staff that it has recruited to implement the Homelessness Reduction Act, unless the Government can confirm their ongoing commitment to fund the implementation of the Act. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Homeless Reduction Act, which I and many other Members supported, will be a wasted opportunity to address homelessness unless the Government make that commitment?

Layla Moran: I absolutely agree. Indeed, I will make that point myself later. We need to ensure that the resources are available to make this work.

Local authorities spent £1.1 billion preventing and tackling homelessness in 2015-16, but the Public Accounts Committee found that there were problems: a lack of guidelines on how they should spend the funding they receive and what outcomes they are aiming for. The increase in spending to address homelessness coupled with ongoing cuts to local authority budgets means that councils are struggling to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place. Instead, their funding is being spent on tackling homelessness after it has already occurred.

According to the National Audit Office report that underpinned our inquiry, spending on temporary accommodation, which is often poor, has risen from £622 million to £845 million. Meanwhile, countries such as Finland that have prioritised prevention are saving an average of £13,000 a year per homeless person. The key feature is that such countries give homeless people a stable place to stay, where they can rebuild their lives.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will the hon. Lady therefore welcome the £28 million investment in the Housing First initiative, which is very much along the lines of the Scandinavian model to which she refers?

Layla Moran: I will, of course. Any money in this area is a good thing, but I do have a concern about the supplementary estimate for 2017-18 that I want to raise with the Minister.

The estimate proposes a reduction in current spending on preventing homelessness, from £265.8 million to £263.6 million. It also proposes to remove £25 million of capital funding previously allocated for reducing homelessness that will now not be spent in 2017-18. Given that the NAO and the Public Accounts Committee

were both clear that there needs to be a focus on preventing homelessness in the first place, these figures are a cause for concern.

I very much welcome the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, as did the whole Committee. Our concern, however, was that far too much sway was put on the Minister for that Act alone to be the panacea. It is not going to work without extra funding available to councils in order to implement it and without funding for truly affordable rents, particularly social rents.

Let me highlight the case of one of my constituents, who lives in a rented house in Abingdon with her two children, one of whom has autism. She recently contacted me because, despite working full time, she cannot afford her rent and is terrified of eviction. She has looked high and low, but cannot find anywhere to live in Abingdon. This story exemplifies the crux of the issue. The report showed that the main driver of the current rise in homeless is the spiralling rents in the private rented sector. As a nation, how did we get to the stage where a mother in full-time work cannot afford a roof over her head?

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Surely building more houses can help to reduce homelessness. Does the hon. Lady welcome the £9 billion that the Government have put towards building more affordable and social housing?

Layla Moran: I do welcome it, although I worry. As the hon. Gentleman will know, given that his constituency is in Oxfordshire, even something “affordable” in Oxfordshire is not really that affordable when people want to buy. The prices are 80% of market value, but in a grossly inflated market. The key issue is that very little social rented accommodation is being built in our county and across the nation.

Wera Hobhouse: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Layla Moran: I have to make some progress. I am sorry, but I am mindful of what Madam Deputy Speaker said.

The estimates show a £259 million reduction in Homes and Communities Agency funding for starter homes and a £72 million reduction this year in affordable homes spending. This worries me. Meanwhile, the estimates show a significant increase in funding for Help to Buy. But those who are about to become homeless are very far from accessing Help to Buy: they have no spare cash, so how are they meant to raise the money for even a small deposit? The estimates also show that capital spend on other housing programmes will fall by £1.2 billion—a reduction of 40%—from £3 billion to £1.8 billion. Help to Buy is useful, but it is certainly not the fix-all solution. The Government have got the emphasis wrong.

Liberal Democrats would like to see a more ambitious programme of house building, but one that aims to be truly affordable—not 80% of market value—and that, critically, also includes rented housing. We have yet to hear from the Government how they are going to achieve that, in the latest Budget or elsewhere.

We also need to consider that people become homeless for a number of other reasons, the most common of which is the end of a private tenancy. Decreasing numbers of houses available for social rent means that local

authorities are having to rely on private accommodation providers. This accommodation is often of a poor standard and does not offer value for money. There is a problem with landlords who do not want to accept people in receipt of housing allowance, and we suspect that universal credit will make this situation much worse.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making an incredibly powerful speech, and a lot of personal commitment has clearly been put into addressing this issue. She mentioned universal credit among other policies. Given that this has contributed to the problem, is it one of the policies that she is most embarrassed about her party pursuing while in government with the Conservative party?

Layla Moran: I am afraid that that is not what this debate is about; I am going to move on.

The NAO has found that

“changes to Local Housing Allowance...are likely to have contributed to the affordability of tenancies for those on benefits, and are an element of the increase in homelessness.”

The key point about joined-up thinking predates any Government. If we are truly to tackle the issue of homelessness, a key recommendation of the Committee’s report is that not only should the money and the provisions of the Homelessness Reduction Act be available, but that we also press Governments to work together.

My last point is that a taskforce from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is meant to be leading this work, yet we were shocked to hear that the previous taskforce met only three times between 2015 and 2017. My understanding is that, as of last week, the new taskforce set up under the Homelessness Reduction Act has not even met once. It is critical that the Government take this matter seriously. Those who are homeless are in dire straits. They deserve not just our compassion and care, but, critically, they need us to find the money to put a roof over their heads. That is the best thing for them and, in the spirit of these estimates day debates, it is the most cost-effective thing to do.

2.20 pm

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). I welcome today’s debate on the estimates of public spending by the Government on homelessness, which is a big challenge across the country. Happily, some great initiatives that aim to improve the current situation are coming up.

First, I acknowledge the £1 billion investment allocated to combating rough sleeping through to 2020. Over the past seven years, there has been an increase in rough sleeping from 2,000 to 4,000, and one root of the problem is mental health issues, which mean that some rough sleepers refuse offers of accommodation. Moreover, many of the rough sleepers in the UK—nearly 60% of the total—are recent arrivals.

To tackle rough sleeping in Northampton, the council has brought together a series of local services and organisations—charities, faith groups, health professionals and advice and support providers—and the police to develop a rough sleepers strategy, “Together we can change lives”, which encourages people to prevent and

[*Andrew Lewer*]

reduce rough sleeping in the borough. I take this opportunity to congratulate Northampton's emergency night shelter for its great work. It opened a year ago and has provided more than 180 homeless people with a temporary shelter.

Rebecca Pow: This very week in Taunton Deane, police are meeting with the chamber of commerce, along with health and housing specialists, to discuss the serious issue of homelessness. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is not just one solution or just one problem? We need to work together in a cross-departmental way.

Andrew Lewer: That is absolutely critical and very much in the spirit of what I am outlining here.

The 94 volunteers in the night shelter have helped 104 of their guests move into settled accommodation; 12 people are currently there. Alongside that is the work of the Northampton Hope Centre, which I visited last year and was most impressed by. Some 36 volunteers as well as local faith groups, Northampton Partnership Homes, S2S, Midland Heart, the county council, SSAFA, the Army, the Hope centre and the council all participated in a borough-wide count of rough sleepers in Northampton on 10 November 2017. All the people found were over 25, and of the 11 people identified 10 were already known to the council's street outreach team. Of those, five were refusing to engage with local services, four had been provided with accommodation but lost it, as the report indicated, through their own actions. That shows the seriousness of the challenge and some of the complexities of the cases.

The rough sleeping strategy is collaborative—a determined approach to achieve a step change in tackling the reasons why people sleep rough and help those on our streets to turn their lives around. As my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) said, the issue is about working across all partner agencies to provide the right mix of advice, support and practical help to change each person's life.

I believe that tackling homelessness also means building more houses. I am pleased to point out that since 2010, the Government have increased new housing numbers by 50%.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the only way of providing properly affordable homes is for local councils to build social housing?

Andrew Lewer: That is one part of the mix of a solution. The way forward is through a whole range of options that the Government have been using. I would never under any circumstances say, "This is the one solution to providing houses or tackling homelessness". As my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane mentioned earlier, a partnership approach is needed. We need to use all the tools in the toolbox to get on top of the problem.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that councils ought to have their own local plans? They should be in the best place to understand local housing needs.

Andrew Lewer: I absolutely agree that localism and a localist approach is right. The Government's role is to empower local authorities to reflect the needs in their communities. We have already heard today how diverse the communities across the country are; "once size fits all" will not work.

Some 357,000 affordable homes have been built since 2010 and £9 billion has been invested. I am also happy that, more locally, Northampton will be provided with an additional £198,415 to 2020 to help it deliver changes arising from the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. I believe that the Act is a giant step in the right direction. It encourages local authorities to develop solutions tailored to each area, together with the people affected by the issues. Both Crisis and Shelter have praised this legislative reform, which is to be implemented in April 2018.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I am greatly enjoying the hon. Gentleman's speech. Does he agree that one way to tackle homelessness through the private sector is with cleverly targeted improvement grants for privately owned substandard properties? Those could be used to house the homeless. I am thinking of properties above shops, for instance, in town and city centres.

Andrew Lewer: That open-minded, mixed approach is exactly the sort of thing that I would advocate. As we heard in the Communities and Local Government Committee yesterday, an approach to private and public sector housing that takes the best of each is most useful of all.

As successful initiatives demonstrate, reducing homelessness is more effective when local authorities can distribute funds according to local needs and collaborate with volunteers and charities in the area, thus using everyone's expertise. Fortunately, I believe that the Homelessness Reduction Act will very much help in achieving that.

2.26 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): In 2016, the Communities and Local Government Committee conducted an inquiry into homelessness and addressed many of the issues, including the fact that we do not have a really good take on what homelessness is. It is about rough sleepers, sofa surfing, and people living in overcrowded accommodation and with in-laws. The statistics are not satisfactory. The Government have accepted that we need to do a lot of work in trying to improve them. The Select Committee also did pre-legislative scrutiny on the Homelessness Reduction Bill, as it was then—the first time a Select Committee had done pre-leg scrutiny on a private Member's Bill. In the end, the Act that came through the House with all-party agreement and great support was significantly helped by that scrutiny.

There are challenges. Everyone can see that the Act's content is really good. It tries to put the emphasis on prevention so that there is not the ridiculous situation of people being told to go away and wait until the bailiffs come before they will be considered as homeless. In a case I had recently, people were told to wait until twins were born in a cramped one-bedroom flat before

they would be considered homeless. The Act ought to force local authorities to take proper account of such things.

People are entitled to a proper plan when they go to see an authority. Their expectations about what they need in respect of their jobs, their caring arrangements and the schooling of their children should be taken account of; in many cases, however, local authorities are simply not able to do that because of the shortage of housing. People who are not entitled to priority rehousing must get proper advice. One of the horror stories we heard during evidence was that people were often sent away with a scrap of paper on which there were a few telephone numbers—often out of date—and told, “Go and ring them if you want any help.”

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that single men in particular are given that message—that they are right at the bottom of the queue, and sometimes wasting their time—very early on? They will often end up homeless and on the streets.

Mr Betts: It is single people in that situation—women as well as men. We had evidence from both at our Select Committee inquiry. They are not entitled to priority rehousing from the local authority, but they are entitled to advice, although they were not getting it in all too many cases.

The Government have given an extra sum, between £60 million and £70 million, to help the implementation of the 2017 Act. I do not think that anyone in local government thinks that sufficient. I hope that the Government are open-minded about the issue: it was emphasised over and over again, on a cross-party basis, both by the Select Committee and the Bill Committee, that the money will have to be looked at again. The Act must not fail because of a lack of resources for local authorities to implement it.

As it stands, the Homelessness Reduction Act is likely to reduce not homelessness but its growth. As the NAO report on the estimates highlights, the big growth in homelessness and in the percentage of people presenting as homeless and being accepted is because of section 21 notices being served in the private rented sector and people not being able to afford the rent in that sector, as local housing allowance does not keep pace with rent increases. That is the situation, and it seems that the Department for Work and Pensions and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, as it is now called, simply have not got their act joined up.

There needs to be an analysis of the effectiveness of constraining local housing allowance and what impact that has on extra spending down the line by local authorities on dealing with the consequences of increased homelessness. That analysis needs to be done if Government are going to justify that position. Something needs to be done urgently.

Another problem is that many homeless people, including single people or people in temporary accommodation, are offered supported housing at some stage. All the evidence, from St Mungo's and others, has been that the Government's current proposal of grants being given to local authorities—albeit on a ring-fenced basis initially—to deal with supported housing of less than two years' duration, which generally applies to people who are homeless, is not going to work. It will not encourage the provision of supported housing or allow existing housing

to be maintained. St Mungo's, the Salvation Army, Home Group and the YMCA have all given evidence to the Government and to my Select Committee to say that that needs to be revisited if we are going to have a proper service and system.

This should not be simply about trying to address the issues of people who become homeless. That is really important. Why have we got a problem? In the end, it is because we have a shortage of housing in this country. I know that the Government have an ambitious target, which I share, to get us to a point where we are building 300,000 new homes a year in this country. However, we are not going to build those new homes unless a very high percentage are built by local authorities and housing associations with Government support. That is the reality.

I welcome the Government giving a £1 billion lift to local authorities by raising the housing cap, but as the Treasury Committee has argued, we need to abolish that cap altogether, and the Government need to sit down with the Local Government Association and look at how we can start delivering social housing that people can afford. What is needed in this country is a major programme. That is needed for the people who cannot afford to buy and cannot afford rents in the private sector, and it is needed to hit the 300,000 target. We will not hit it any other way.

The other great advantage of social house building of that scale is that it is counter-cyclical. We all know that building by private developers will go up and down with the market. At least we can have a degree of certainty in the long term if we plan for a major social house building programme, which will continue through recessions. The Government ought to give serious consideration to that.

Finally, we have to think about the right to buy in areas of acute housing need. It cannot be right to give people a 70% discount to buy homes that are the only ones available for people in acute housing need and people who become homeless. Surely we need a review of the effectiveness of public spending, because that simply cannot be right.

Let us have a look at the discount in areas of acute housing need or at the possibility of suspending the right to buy for a period, with local support. Let us at least look at 100% of the receipts being reinvested in social housing, rather than the percentage of the receipts at present, so that we can deliver back not simply one-for-one replacements—even that is not happening—but like-for-like replacements. A family home being sold off and replaced by an upper maisonette really is not good enough for a homeless family with children who need a home with a garden to live in.

2.33 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and to co-sponsor the debate with the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran).

Homelessness touches every part of the UK, and we in this place need look no further than the entrance to Parliament, where tragically a Portuguese man died just two weeks ago. Figures released this year show an increase in rough sleeping of 169% since 2010, which means that on any one night, more than 4,000 people are sleeping on our streets. While those figures are shocking, they do not show the true scale of the problem.

[Gillian Keegan]

When we think of homelessness, we imagine people sleeping in doorways or underpasses, or on park benches, but there is another type of homelessness: people living in temporary accommodation. In March last year, an estimated 77,000 families, including 120,000 children, were living without a place to call home. Those are people living in hostels and bed and breakfasts. They are not sleeping on the streets, but they are without a home.

There are countless others whom we do not hear about: the hidden homeless who are without a home and out of sight. I recently met a constituent who is a single mother of three and works part time. Her tenancy agreement ended after her landlady wanted to move back into the house, but when my constituent tried to find another home, she discovered she could not afford anywhere to rent, as the rental market had moved beyond her reach. Chichester District Council offered to put her up in a B&B 20 minutes away but, as a mother, she knew the destabilising effect that that would have on her children, and the long distance would make the school run challenging and expensive. Instead, she has had to split her family, with two of her children staying with her mother while she and her youngest are with her grandmother. That decision meant that her children could stay at their respective schools, unlike many others in temporary accommodation, who miss an average of 55 school days. That story is not uncommon, as the termination of private sector tenancy agreements is now the biggest single driver of homelessness.

Successive Governments have failed to build adequate quantities of housing and the right type of housing. The demand-supply ratio has forced up rents and house prices, especially around the south-east. Across England, rents have increased by three times the rate of earnings, and the average rent for a two-bed flat in Chichester is now £944 a month. For many on lower incomes in expensive areas, there is a likelihood of their being priced out of the market and, without family help, becoming homeless.

To tackle that, we know that we need to build more homes. I am pleased that the Government have announced a raft of policies to achieve that and have put house building at the top of their agenda. The multi-pronged approach is the right one, and just one of the measures that are being put in place is a change to planning law so that there are tougher consequences when planned homes are not built. For too long, developers have acquired planning permission and enjoyed watching the value of land increase while failing to lay a single brick.

Of course, investment is key. The £1.5 billion home building fund and £2.7 billion increase to the housing infrastructure fund will go a long way towards ensuring that houses are built in areas where there is great need. I am sure that we all welcome the further investment in the affordable homes programme to the tune of £2 billion, meaning that the programme expenditure will reach £9 billion by 2020-21.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): My hon. Friend is surely right about the importance of a long-term solution and providing more affordable housing, including in our area of West Sussex. Does she agree that there is also an important role for schemes

such as emergency hosting for young people who become homeless, which can be provided by volunteers? The brilliant Depaul Nightstop service—I declare an interest, as my partner works for Depaul—provides such a scheme, but in only half the local authorities in England.

Gillian Keegan: I do, and I am familiar with that fantastic scheme. We need to be more innovative to solve this problem. With a large number of people seeking permanent homes, house building measures are a step in the right direction, but building homes takes time, and many people's needs are urgent, so such schemes are helpful.

The country has faced similar situations throughout its history. In post-war Britain, when the nation was struggling to house its people, my own grandparents, newly married with a baby daughter, found themselves homeless after both had served their country during the war. No facilities for families were available at that time, so their only option was to stay in male-only and female-only hostels while their young daughter—my mum—went into an orphanage. Their plight was resolved when they were offered a prefabricated house to rent. My nan loved her prefab and always talked fondly of her first home. It was not just a house; it was the key to her building a happy family life. I urge the Government and local authorities to think innovatively so that they can provide more social housing in high-price areas for rental quickly.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Lady agree that one area to look at is prefab housing? I know that it got a bad reputation, but it might be the way forward.

Gillian Keegan: I think it is worth looking at. I have looked at some modern homes that have been pre-made in factories, and they are lovely, spacious and very warm—in fact, the one I went into was too warm.

Rough sleepers are among the most vulnerable people in society. We know that they have complex needs. Some are suffering from mental and physical health conditions. That point is highlighted by the fact that rough sleepers are nine times more likely to commit suicide than the general population.

In Chichester, we have a strong community spirit, with people willing to go the extra mile to help one another. As an MP, I have had the privilege of meeting and working with many of these people. Charities such as Stonepillow work alongside churches such as St Pancras with the 19 rough sleepers in Chichester, providing them with basic facilities, including washing machines, a warm shower, a meal and a bed for the night. Importantly, they help to build support plans and offer a guided route to help people to get their life back on track. A GP surgery runs a needle exchange programme so that people suffering from addiction can get the right advice and begin to turn their lives around, as they can through the Change, Grow, Live programmes provided by the council.

As I am sure that colleagues are aware, addiction is more prevalent among those who sleep rough. I hope that the Government's Housing First pilots in the north, which do not have strict preconditions attached to them, are successful, and that this model can be rolled out across the rest of the UK.

The Homelessness Reduction Act will provide a shift in the homelessness policy by working on preventive measures. We all agree that prevention is key, and the policy will ensure that everyone who is homeless or threatened with homelessness will be able to get advice and support from their local authority. Chichester District Council has been given £113,400 of extra funding to deliver the changes.

I welcome the Government's commitment to halve the number of rough sleepers by 2022 and to remove rough sleeping from our society by 2027, as well as their recognition of the complex nature of homelessness, which cannot be tackled by one Department alone. Tonight, however, thousands of people will be on our streets in sub-zero temperatures, while the number of people in temporary accommodation is unsustainable and actually very expensive. We need to find an effective solution, and while the Government's housing policies will increase the housing stock over time, we need to prioritise more social housing in high-rent areas as, at 30% to 50% of market rents, these are the only truly affordable options for those on modest incomes.

2.41 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): It is a privilege to be the third member of the Public Accounts Committee to speak in today's debate. It would be remiss of me not to mention the speech made by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), who is a member of the Committee, in which she focused a laser beam on issues of concern to her. I am also delighted to follow the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), who is not afraid to go after any Department, and does so without fear or favour.

The problem of homelessness goes much deeper than the 9,000 rough sleepers in this country. As a report published by the Public Accounts Committee clearly outlined at the end of last year, there are over 78,000 households in temporary accommodation, including 120,000 children. Although these tens of thousands have a roof over their heads, they do not have a place to call home. This is a national disgrace, but it is not inevitable.

Solutions will require effective decision making by the Government and the proper targeting of funding. It is all very well for the Government to announce £1 billion to end homelessness, but if that money is wasted and there are overruns, those we seek to help will not get the assistance they need. What is certain when we talk about money is that the solution is not to cut funding for preventing homelessness, or to remove the £25 million in capital funding allocated for reducing homelessness, as the Government have done in the past.

The Public Accounts Committee report, which the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon mentioned, highlighted the then Department for Communities and Local Government's light-touch approach to homelessness—with the emphasis on “light-touch”—and its many failings. This must be turned around.

We have heard that the Department is working closely with other Departments and local authorities to reduce homelessness, and about the good work of the homelessness task force. Over and over again, Departments have promised to engage in joined-up working and have given lofty assurances about fixing major problems.

All too often, however, we see that the reality is very different, and unrealistic promises have come crashing down under the Public Account Committee's scrutiny once Departments' plans come into contact with the real world. That is the issue with homelessness: we have all these lofty ideals, but if we are not delivering on them, ultimately the problem will go on and on.

We see from the Public Accounts Committee report that despite the promises of joint working between the former Department for Communities and Local Government and the Department for Work and Pensions, neither has assessed the impact of changes to the local housing allowance. This is despite clear evidence of the ever-rising cost of private rented accommodation. The availability of affordable accommodation for people on low incomes is dwindling in areas of high inequality, yet little seems to have been done by Departments to tackle this. The report is clear in recommending that the Department should put together and implement a realistic strategy, with specific actions to reduce homelessness. These actions must be backed up with realistic measures to ensure that those actions achieve the right outcome.

Why is a Welsh MP speaking in a debate on homelessness, which is a devolved matter? It is because I want to bring up the example of what we are doing. In Wales, with our Labour-led Welsh Assembly, we have an innovative approach to homelessness under the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, which came into force in 2016. Local authorities in Wales have assisted more people, and there has been a reduction in the number of people who remain homeless after seeking help. That has been achieved, among other important changes, by placing a legal duty on local authorities to help to prevent homelessness. I strongly believe that England can and must follow the example set by Wales, and I hope that that will emerge during the passage of the Vagrancy (Repeal) Bill. It is simply not acceptable that families who do not have access to social housing are put in substandard private accommodation.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give us a couple of examples from Wales so that we can understand how Wales has tackled this issue? He has mentioned legislation, but can he give us some examples of the practical implementation of such measures?

Chris Evans: Yes, I can. In my constituency of Islwyn and in Caerphilly, we have the quality home assurance, which is providing top-quality accommodation. We are ensuring that families do not have to stay in bed and breakfasts, and that they are given accommodation as soon as they become homeless. These are small steps, but they are making a large difference to people's lives in my constituency.

It is not a good situation if people have substandard accommodation, and it is not even a good use of taxpayers' money. Perhaps the only beneficiaries of such a situation are the unscrupulous landlords who charge extortionate rents for substandard accommodation and get away with it, with the taxpayer footing the bill.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): May I inform my hon. Friend about a converted warehouse in the middle of an industrial estate in my constituency where four London boroughs are placing families?

[*Siobhain McDonagh*]

We estimate that the landlord of that premises gains between £1.2 million and £1.5 million of taxpayers' money each year.

Chris Evans: Sadly, that is not an isolated case. There are a number of cases, especially in south-east England—I know some Members in the Chamber represent that area—of unscrupulous landlords cashing in on the misery and misfortune of homeless families. Something needs to be done by the Government, and we need to come down on these people like a ton of bricks.

The rapid increase in the number of rough sleepers and those in temporary accommodation strongly suggests that the Government's approach to tackling homelessness is failing. Clearly there is a need for radical thinking on this matter, in line with the example set by Wales, that goes beyond undoubtedly well-meaning but ultimately vague and unrealistic promises.

The local housing allowance appears to be unfit for purpose in supporting families into private rented accommodation. Something should be done about the level of the local housing allowance or the cost of private rents—or both. Even more than concrete action on the LHA and the cost of rented accommodation, it would clearly make sense to increase the supply of social housing, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) said.

It is well known that there is a severe housing shortfall in this country. It seems that relying on private developers to build the necessary units of housing is another Government strategy that is failing. Perhaps it is time for the Department to consider expanding the delivery of new units of social housing and ensuring that social housing remains under the ownership of local authorities. While I think that we can all agree that people should be able to own their own home, we can ensure value for taxpayers' money only if social housing is not constantly sold off to the private sector.

While this is merely the tip of the iceberg in addressing the causes of homelessness, such measures would at the very least represent an important step forward in reducing the numbers of people who find themselves without a home. We have heard it many times in this place and elsewhere, but I will say it again: we live in one of the richest countries in the world, but it is clear that rising inequality has created a divided nation between the haves and the have-nots. It is almost like there are two countries, and this is expressed clearly and harshly in the number of homeless people. We can and we must act to reduce the extent of homelessness in this country. It is our duty to those people and to the 120,000-plus children living in temporary accommodation. Their families are suffering; they need our help now.

2.50 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans).

There is no inevitability about homelessness. In 21st-century Britain, there is no reason for anybody to sleep rough on our streets. It is perhaps too easy to walk past a rough sleeper and pretend that they are not there, and to think that the individual before us must have done something wrong—that they are a drug addict or alcoholic,

someone to be fearful of and stay away from. We must break this taboo. Every rough sleeper is somebody's son or daughter and every or any single one of us could be in that position within a small number of unfortunate life events. We must never forget that.

It cannot be said enough that one person sleeping rough on our streets is one person too many. In last year's autumn Budget, the Chancellor announced £28 million of funding for three Housing First pilots in Manchester, Liverpool and the west midlands. That was such an important move, because the underlying causes of homelessness, and, in particular, rough sleeping, are incredibly complex. To suggest that they are attributable to any single cause is to display an unwillingness truly to understand the issue.

The more we can learn about what forces people on to our streets, the better we can target preventive support, yet there are some things that we do know. If we look at the 2016-17 Combined Homelessness and Information Network figures for London, we can see that among those who were interviewed the single biggest reason given by new rough sleepers for leaving their previous accommodation was the loss of a tenancy, yet that was not because they were evicted for antisocial behaviour or rent arrears. Individuals were asked to leave, most likely through section 21 notices from their landlords. The second biggest reason was relationship breakdown, which is not all that unexpected given that young single men are rarely considered a priority need unless they are vulnerable. We need to consider both issues to see how rough sleeping can be prevented, but it is more important to ensure that there are support services in place for those already sleeping rough on our streets.

The CHAIN report found that 47% of the rough sleepers that the network spoke to had mental health support needs, 44% had alcohol support needs and 35% had drug support needs. That underlines the problem in trying to tackle this issue: rough sleeping is not simply a homelessness problem. All too often we hear stories of individuals who have been helped off the streets and into temporary accommodation but who do not get the support they need to address the root causes so, unfortunately, they end up back on the streets.

Addiction can also affect people's ability to enter emergency accommodation. In my experience, those sleeping rough on our streets cannot stay at the local night shelter or hostel because they have an alcohol or drug addiction. That is why Housing First is so important. We need to get vulnerable people off the streets and into stable accommodation so that we can help them with their underlying support needs.

Mr Jim Cunningham: We do not have to go too far from here—just down to Victoria—to see people living rough on the streets. I often wonder why nothing has been done about them, and I see them regularly down there. There is another factor too. Homeless families have been exploited by landlords and are in overcrowded accommodation, and some of them are evicted because they cannot afford to pay the rents, so we should think about building council housing for a change as well.

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I want specifically to talk about rough sleeping, and he raises a point about wider homelessness. I have no doubt that colleagues across the Chamber will speak

more widely about homelessness, but I want to talk about rough sleeping, which does not necessarily fall into the category of families. It tends predominantly to involve young single men and young single women.

We do not have to look too widely across the world to see that Housing First is working and helping rough sleepers with the most complex needs.

Helen Hayes: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about Housing First, in that it is a well-proven approach to addressing the complex needs of rough sleepers. Does he therefore agree that three pilot schemes, none of them in London, represent a paltry approach from this Government to a practice that we know works and that should be funded to address this urgent crisis?

Will Quince: The hon. Lady, with whom I worked on the Homelessness Reduction Act, makes a good point. If she bears with me, she might like what I will have to say in just a few moments.

In my view, the Housing First approach is a common-sense approach. Think about it: how can we provide the support services needed to help rough sleepers with their mental health, drug or alcohol issues when the support workers never know from day to day where they can find those individuals? How do we address the general and mental health problems that are all too common with rough sleepers when they are under extraordinary pressure and physical strain from living on the streets?

Like the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), I am pleased the Government have launched the pilots, but I think that it is time to go further and faster. I believe that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government wants to go further. He is committed to tackling the issue and is determined that the Government will halve rough sleeping by 2022 and eliminate it entirely by 2027. But I want him to be bold and radical. If this was the first time that such a project had been undertaken, I would understand being hesitant about moving faster and the desire to evaluate how the pilots work, but they already exist in the UK and are used across the world. We should implement Housing First across the country as a priority. At the very least—and I look to the Minister on this—let us have a timetable for the full roll-out of Housing First programmes across England.

Most importantly, we must ensure that the programmes are fully linked up with local support services that are given the funding they need to help those sleeping rough with their mental health problems or addictions. Of course, that will involve spending money, but in my view that is a short-term cost. The study by the University of York and the Centre for Housing Policy found that Housing First programmes cost between £26 and £40 an hour, yet the potential savings are estimated to be as high as £15,000 per person per year if we include reductions in use across the NHS and in our police and courts services. So this is not only the right thing to do, but will save the taxpayer money.

Homelessness and rough sleeping in particular often have many complex underlying issues, which means that addressing them will require more than one solution. The Government have already made good progress on tackling homelessness, whether through the Homelessness

Reduction Act—it was a privilege to serve on the Bill Committee, and I am delighted that it has become an Act of Parliament and will be implemented in April—

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Will Quince: Of course.

Giles Watling: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. As a student, I studied sociology and I spent some time on the streets and at St Martin-in-the-Fields at the Crypt. I know that people went through a lot of hard times down there, and that was many years ago—decades and decades ago. This problem has been with us for such a long time but what we must do is think outside the box and always be flexible. Housing First is a great and a wonderful project, but we must go further and we must always look at these people, communicate with them and ask them why they are there. It is not always just about mental health or family breakdown. There are many reasons, but we must keep the line of communication open.

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, which has taken up a fair chunk of my remaining time—but nevertheless I thank him for it. We need to stop thinking of rough sleeping as simply a homelessness problem and, by rolling out Housing First programmes across England, linking them with support services and giving them the funding they need, we have the opportunity to transform the lives of the people sleeping rough on our streets. My hon. Friend is right that we need to think outside the box. I think that to a large extent Housing First is the answer, but we must roll it out faster and further. I know that the Secretary of State wants to do this, so I say to the Minister: let this be the Government that end rough sleeping for good.

2.58 pm

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I speak as co-chair of the all-party group for ending homelessness, which I am pleased to co-chair with the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince). I work with him to highlight solutions in a non-partisan way. Doing so takes awareness of the policies contributing to the problem as well as ability to identify the policies that are missing altogether. It also takes an admission that Ministers try very hard to avoid: homelessness has risen every year since 2010. This year-on-year growth is avoidable and appalling. In 2005, the numbers of people rough sleeping across the whole of England were 459. It is now estimated that 8,000 people slept rough in London alone last year. Shelter estimates that more than 300,000 people were in temporary accommodation last year, including, as we have heard, 120,000 children who woke up on Christmas day in often unsuitable places, perhaps sharing a bathroom or kitchen with strangers. That growth is a direct result of Government policies since 2010. When Ministers axed national funding for genuinely affordable homes and brutally slashed council funding, including £200 million from my borough of Southwark, it is hard to deny the impact.

When our safety net of the social security system is picked apart, leaving disadvantaged people with no income at all in too many cases, especially under universal

[Neil Coyle]

credit delays, it is inevitable that homelessness will rise. When mental health services are eradicated, Ministers cannot pretend not to know that 40% of homeless people have mental health conditions. When Ministers undermine supported housing for people with mental health conditions and other vulnerable groups, the problem will only grow. When drug and alcohol cessation services are decimated, it is simply deceitful to pretend it will not contribute to a rise in homelessness and costs to the NHS, as people end up admitted to A&E in crisis.

Costs are rising. Southwark Council spent £3 million tackling homelessness last year, on up-front help to prevent people from losing homes and to tackle rough sleeping. But still in my surgery sessions I see the problem every week. I have seen a 65-year-old cleaner sleeping on night buses, in work but carrying as many of her belongings with her as she could carry. I have seen a 19-year-old woman sleeping with different men every night rather than go back on the streets. I have seen a working family with three children under 10 wrongly denied the right to continue working in this country by the Home Office and put on the streets by a private landlord until a local church stepped in.

As in so many other areas where the Government have abdicated their responsibilities, we see people and charities stepping in. I would like to thank the staff and all volunteers providing crucial support and services across our country, but in particular in my community. We have seen massive growth in visible rough sleeping around Elephant and Castle and London Bridge, and temporary accommodation in Southwark is simply exhausted. I have been trying to help the Robes Project over a number of years. I have slept outside Southwark cathedral three times—please do sponsor me this year—in winter to raise awareness and funds for its work in providing accommodation and food in 28 churches every winter, opening its doors in November. It relies on volunteers to provide that accommodation and food. It does an incredible job.

In recess, I spent a very cold evening with St Mungo's outreach team on its StreetLink work. Anyone can refer a rough sleeper to StreetLink online, through their app, or on the phone 24 hours a day. Sadiq Khan has advertised StreetLink and since December, Londoners have referred over 2,000 homeless people using this service—double that at the same period last year. I think that demonstrates a public will to tackle the problem that is simply not matched by Government action. It is because of St Mungo's amazing staff and volunteers like Eamon, Darren and Dave, who I met on that cold Monday evening in recess, that desperate people are getting the help they need in this extreme weather.

The cold weather is not the only reason people are more concerned about the issue currently. Just two weeks ago a homeless man died on our doorstep here at Westminster—a shocking case, but sadly not isolated. Just weeks earlier and within a mile of this place, another man died on the streets of our capital. Deaths of homeless people have been recorded from Edinburgh to Birmingham in the past couple of months alone.

Ministers have twiddled their thumbs, ignored the problem and passed the buck for far too long. There are clear policies to help: building more homes and supporting

councils to build more, as well as lifting the local housing allowance freeze; intervening in the failing private sector to cap rents and provide secure, longer tenancies, in particular for families; funding the services we know help in mental health, and in drug and alcohol cessation; ending delays and cuts to disadvantaged people, from universal credit to the personal independence payment and the employment and support allowance; and backing a rent deposit scheme, as advocated by Crisis.

One of the lowlights of the 2010 election was the “Broken Britain” slogan. Little did we know that the Cameron soundbite was a destination, not a description. Nothing highlights how badly broken our country is than people freezing to death on our streets in the face of, and as a direct consequence of, a cold-hearted Government ignoring what worked, denying culpability, and refusing to fund and implement sufficient viable solutions today.

3.3 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): Reducing homelessness across the UK has to be a huge priority and I welcome the work the Government are doing to move forward. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 will ensure that all English local authorities, public services and the third sector work together more effectively to prevent homelessness. The Act, which comes into effect in April, will also help the Government to meet their aim of eliminating rough sleeping by 2027.

I am delighted with the efforts to bring local services and providers together. I spent much of the autumn in my constituency examining our local homelessness services, holding a number of summits with different groups from the public sector, charities and business, and bringing along the then Minister with responsibility for homelessness and the Home Secretary to meet them. From those discussions, it was abundantly clear that drawing up invisible barriers between services, and being protectionist about priorities and funding cuts, does nothing to improve the support available to people either homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. I am pleased that Ministers have committed over £1 billion to tackle homelessness through to 2020, with money going directly to local authorities, as well as to centrally funded homelessness programmes. In particular, the pilot studies that will look at new ways to combat this issue are very welcome. I hope the Government will learn those lessons and roll out the successful aspects of those schemes sooner rather than later.

In Mansfield, the number of people classified as homeless and in priority need has actually fallen since 2012. I am pleased to note that the numbers registered as living in temporary accommodation has fallen, too. That is down to a number of factors, including the good work done by the local authority and by Framework, which provides commissioned services, including an amazing outreach programme. It is heart-wrenching to hear about the lives and stories of some of the people using its service. When I went out with Framework's outreach team at 6 am on a cold autumn morning, I met a number of Mansfield's homeless people. The striking thing is that so many are in that position through no fault of their own. One in particular struck a chord with me: a young man who had been injected with class A drugs by his mother while still at primary school. The truth is that he never had a chance. The outreach service

is working with him and others to help them get on their feet. The key thing about the work done by Framework is that it recognises that while the housing aspect is obviously a huge factor in tackling homelessness, equally important is access to support services around mental health, drugs and alcohol, and a complex variety of needs. It is telling that many of Mansfield's entrenched homeless have been given housing in the past, but have been unable to keep it for a variety of complex reasons.

It is concerning that despite the positive figures since 2012—as I said, the number of homeless people has actually fallen by about a third—in the past year it has started to creep up again. Far from the simplistic image that is sometimes painted of homelessness, where many people talk about the lack of available housing—it is hugely important, yes, and prevalent in London and other areas where the cost of housing is extortionate—in my view it is not the key issue in Mansfield. The causes of rough sleeping are incredibly complex. Individual circumstances can be driven by mental health issues, addiction, family breakdown and so on. That is why it is so important that local services, including both health and housing departments, offer a co-ordinated approach. In Mansfield we have a strong network, including charities such as the Beacon Project which are committed not just to offering food and a shower but prioritising getting everybody access to key services.

When we talk about homeless people, we often think of rough sleepers first. However, as many hon. Members have already said, many fall into the hidden homeless category. Many people are sofa-surfing with friends and family, without a home to call their own. Young people, in particular, can struggle with the up-front costs of renting, and landlords see them as a risky proposition. That is why last year I supported the Crisis Help to Rent campaign, looking for additional funding for local projects aimed at helping homeless people into renting.

One point that is clear from the discussions I have had locally and with Ministers is that low-level ongoing support can make a huge difference to people's lives, helping them to not just gain but maintain a tenancy for the long term. As my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) said, support in managing mental health issues, addiction, financial management, learning difficulties and sometimes even just a regular conversation with a trusted friend can be the difference between leading a relatively normal life and a life on the streets.

In Mansfield, we have some fantastic supported housing associations that help to get people back on their feet. They would love to be able to offer that ongoing support too to the people who rely on them, but they struggle to access the funding to do that. Often, in my experience, they do it anyway through their own dedication and at their own cost, but they would benefit hugely from more support. I was pleased to see an additional £250,000 come forward for Mansfield over three years, through the flexible homelessness support grant, to support the local authority in boosting some of these services.

As I said in my first sentence, homelessness clearly needs to be addressed as a priority and it is important that funding reflects that. I welcome the Government's determination to end rough sleeping and to cut the number of homeless people, and the multiple measures, pilot schemes and changes that have come forward already. The Homelessness Reduction Act is a big step

forward and I hope to see the Housing First pilot expanded quickly. One thing that is often overlooked is that prevention is far better than cure, and this needs to be clearly built in to the Government's plans if they are to meet their commitment. We must ensure that tackling homelessness remains a central priority and that Government funding levels reflect its importance, not just in terms of housing but, vitally, for the support services that come with it.

3.9 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is nothing short of a national disgrace that in 2018 in the United Kingdom, one of the richest countries in the world, there are people left with no alternative but to sleep on the streets. This disgrace was brought sharply into focus by the recent death of a rough sleeper in Westminster tube station, not a stone's throw from this place. My own city of Birmingham was ranked 14th in England last year for people sleeping rough, an increase from the previous year. A recent Public Accounts Committee report found that there are more than 9,000 rough sleepers in England. That is 9,000 people who have nowhere to feel safe; 9,000 people with nowhere to live rather than simply exist; 9,000 people with nowhere to be at peace.

Although rough sleepers are the public face of homelessness, the problem permeates far deeper in our society. The total number of people who are classed as homeless under the law, including single people in hostels and those in temporary accommodation, is truly shocking, with some 78,000 families in England, including 120,000 children, currently living in temporary accommodation. There has been a rise of roughly 29,000 since 2011. Shelter calculated that this equates roughly to 307,000 people recorded as homeless across Britain.

Homelessness is costing local authorities around £1.15 billion, £845 million of which is spent on temporary living costs. The National Audit Office recently concluded that Ministers have no grip on the causes or costs of rising homelessness and have shown no inclination to grasp how the problem has been fuelled in part by housing benefit cuts. It concluded that the Government's attempts to address homelessness since 2011 have failed to deliver value for money. Recent research carried out by Crisis showed that there will be significant costs to future Governments if policies remain the same, and that investment in homelessness prevention and rapid response is much more cost-effective.

Homelessness often results from a combination of events, such as relationship breakdown, debt, adverse experiences in childhood and ill health. A recent audit found that 41% of homeless people reported a long-term physical health problem and 45% had a diagnosed mental health problem, compared with 28% and 25% respectively in the general population. Issues such as depression, alcohol or drug abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia and bi-polar disorder often contribute to homelessness and are exhibited by those who are homeless. For our already over-stretched and under-resourced mental health services, these hard-to-reach individuals pose a serious and complex challenge.

Labour provided 2 million more homes, enabled 1 million more people to be homeowners and provided the largest investment in social housing in a generation. Under Labour, homelessness fell by roughly three quarters

[Preet Kaur Gill]

between 1998 and 2009 to record low levels. This Government cannot escape the fact that because of their policies, we have seen a steep drop in investment for affordable homes, crude cuts to housing benefit, reduced funding for homelessness services and a lack of action to help private renters.

Labour is committed to establishing a Prime Minister-led taskforce on ending rough sleeping and tackling homelessness, making links between housing, health, social security and work. The fact this work would be led by the Prime Minister demonstrates the importance to Labour of ending the tragedy and national shame of homelessness in this country. I hope that the Government will treat this issue with the seriousness and tenacity that it deserves.

3.13 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for nominating this important debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) for co-sponsoring it. As we gather here, the beast from the east is making its presence felt. Conditions serve as a timely reminder that when the weather is harsh, many people find themselves out on the streets and without a warm home. Today of all days, I am conscious of how the weather affects those who are homeless. In my constituency, temperatures are set to drop below minus 4° overnight. It is vital that we help people who may be rough sleeping.

My borough of Stockport has changed the way that it provides emergency shelter in cold weather. Help will now be available to rough sleepers one night after temperatures drop below zero. That is over and above the legal requirement to provide enhanced support after only three nights of sub-zero temperatures, and I am encouraged to see emergency accommodation with beds and showers opening earlier. This week's severe weather is a reminder to us all of the conditions too many people have to survive in without a roof over their heads.

Charities and shelters do incredible work over the winter months to support those who find themselves on the streets. Last week, I had the opportunity to witness at first hand the great effort undertaken by one of our charities to help the most vulnerable. Human Appeal is an Islamic faith-based charity in Cheadle that engages in humanitarian work at home and abroad—it works not only in 25 countries across the world, but in the UK. It recently provided assistance following the Manchester bombing last year, and it raised £94,000 for victims of the Grenfell fire tragedy. Every November, Human Appeal runs the “Wrap Up Manchester” campaign, collecting coats and warm clothes for distribution to rough sleepers and the homeless on the streets of Manchester.

Charities such as Human Appeal demonstrate the vital work that grassroots campaigns can contribute, in addition to the initiatives instigated by the Government. If we are truly going to eradicate homelessness, in my view it will require a collaboration between charities and governmental efforts. As a member of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, which played an important part in bringing forward the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, I visited and heard

evidence from charities such as St Basils in Birmingham, as well as Crisis and the Children's Society. From speaking to young people who have been homeless, whether they were sofa-surfing or sleeping rough, it was evident that issues such as depression and addiction play a part in the personal cycle of chronic homelessness that is difficult to break if it is not tackled early. Having a permanent home offers vulnerable potential rough sleepers security and boosts their self-esteem. It provides a route for them to rebuild their lives and provides a solid foundation to pursue their goals and put their lives back together.

The Government's plan to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and eliminate it altogether by 2027 is ambitious but achievable. If we are truly serious about eradicating homelessness, we must be ambitious in our actions and help people into homes and put a roof over their heads. I welcome last year's autumn Budget announcement of £28 million of funding to pilot a Housing First approach to address this very issue. Three major regions will roll out the pilots, and my region of Greater Manchester will benefit from £1.8 million from that funding pot.

This is an issue that people really care about. Greater Manchester's bid to end rough sleeping by 2020 has attracted support from local business and benefactors. Working together with charities and members of the public, they have raised more than £135,000 for this mayoral homeless fund initiative. Along with the £1.8 million from central Government, that will go a long way in combating rough sleeping in the city region. As part of the Manchester pilot, 15 housing associations and two private rented sector landlords have come together to form the Greater Manchester homes partnership and provide 270 homes for entrenched rough sleepers over a three-year period. The councils have also agreed to give homeless people free access to the documents that they need to secure housing, such as birth certificates. The pilots will support some of the most entrenched rough sleepers off the streets and help them back into a home that will provide stability in their lives. That will help them to recover from complex health issues, such as mental health difficulties, and help sustain their tenancies. It is really important to have that wraparound support.

I am a great believer in learning from our friends and neighbours, so I will turn to Finland for an example. The Finnish Housing First initiative was introduced in 2007 and permanent housing, based on a normal lease, was seen as a fundamental solution for each homeless person. Over the 10 years since its inception, hostels have been converted into supported housing units with independent flats for tenants. Finland has all but eradicated rough sleeping. If Finland can do it, we can too.

I extend my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for introducing the Homelessness Reduction Act, which will be implemented fully in April. It has been a privilege to serve on the Select Committee with him to scrutinise and bring this legislation forward. I welcome that action and the Government initiatives to drive this forward and eradicate homelessness.

3.19 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The hon. Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) and all those who have spoken so far have made passionate speeches, showing how they care about homelessness in their constituency. I hope, therefore, that if my Homelessness

(End of Life Care) Bill gets a Second Reading, they will be there to support it. I share their passion, but I want to make a boring speech. I want to speak about the estimates that are before us today—this is an estimates debate. The reason is—to make a serious point—that the House does not do its job properly, and has not done so for decades, because it does not hold the Government to account for their draft budgets and how they spend taxpayers' money. This Parliament talks about parliamentary sovereignty all the time; I wish we had some, but until this Parliament stands up to the Executive and plays its role in analysing how the money is spent, we will not have anything like parliamentary sovereignty, Brexit or no Brexit.

I make that point with respect to homelessness because there cannot be many other issues on which it is as important that the House get to grips with the money. To illustrate that point, I refer hon. Members to the estimates, which I am sure they looked at ahead of this debate, including the central Government supply estimates published last April, which are the subject of this debate. Nothing in the many tables and figures in the section on the Department for Communities and Local Government, as it was then, talks about homelessness; they are all in very broad aggregate totals that tell us nothing. This is completely unnecessary. Other Parliaments, including the New Zealand and Swedish Parliaments, are given detailed information on spending. They get to deal with the figures and so make real decisions on how the money is spent. We do not, and that is shocking.

Chris Evans: I seek the right hon. Gentleman's advice. He was a Minister for five years. Was this his experience of the Department he ran?

Sir Edward Davey: Yes, it was indeed, and when the Cabinet debated ways to improve value for money, I made the same argument. The then Prime Minister was interested and asked the Cabinet Secretary to pursue it, but unfortunately, after several meetings, it was blocked by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer.

I move now from the main supply estimates to the supplementary supply estimates, which—again—I am sure others have read in detail. These are a little more illuminating and come with a proper memorandum. Hon. Members might be interested to know that they reduce the amount of money for homelessness. It might be for a good reason—I do not know—but it talks about a £9 million reduction in the flexible homelessness support grant. Apparently a new procurement strategy and vehicle is being set up that means the money cannot be spent. I am sure that that £9 million could have been spent on homeless people. It also talks about removing £16 million from the Move On fund—it could not be spent in-year and so apparently has to be spent later on in this Parliament. That is another £16 million not being spent on homelessness. Perhaps the Minister, who I am sure has been briefed for this debate, can tell us why £25 million has been lost from the homelessness budget this fiscal year. If we are to get to grips with this, we have to get to grips with the money.

Jamie Stone: Does my right hon. Friend agree that something could be learned from the close scrutiny the Scottish Parliament gives to these figures? That might be instructive for this place.

Sir Edward Davey: I agree with my hon. Friend. One advantage of devolution is that we can experiment with new ways of doing things, one of which might be better scrutiny of the money.

I am a bit of a geek on this. I wrote a pamphlet about 15 years ago on it. I did some research and found that the last time the House voted down a request from the Government was 1919, which shows that the House has basically given up its role in scrutinising the Budget properly. When one asks for more information, one ends up going to the National Audit Office, which does some decent work on the figures to help the Public Accounts Committee, which is behind the report we are debating now. I refer hon. Members to the NAO report on homelessness published last September, which shows the full extent of the problem. It shows that local authorities spent £1.148 billion on homelessness in 2015-16—the last year we have figures for—of which £845 million was spent on temporary accommodation and £303 million on prevention, support and advice. There is little detail beyond those big aggregate figures, which do not tell us much about how the money was spent.

The commentary in the Auditor General's report is instructive. Paragraph 128 states:

"Local authorities fund the cost of homelessness from a number of different sources... The Department does not know how much of each source of funding is used for each component of homelessness services. Without this information, it cannot fully understand the impact that reducing one source of funding will have on the others...the Department does not have the information it needs to predict where a cut in funding will limit a local authority's ability to meet its duties."

What does that mean? The Department does not know. We are not told. Who does know? Who knows where this money is being spent and whether it is being spent in the best way possible? It is time we got our Parliament up to scratch. Then we can talk about parliamentary sovereignty.

I turn to others parts of the NAO report, which we paid for—it is an expensive and detailed report and we ought to read it properly. It is provided to the House free for Members. I refer them to paragraph 24, which is headed, "Conclusions on Value for Money". It says:

"The Department's recent performance in reducing homelessness therefore cannot be considered value for money."

We need to get to grips with this. The money we are spending is probably not enough and the way we are spending it is not very good. We will not tackle this problem until we sort ourselves out.

The only thing we can find is the trends, and the trends are worrying. We have been spending more in recent years on dealing with the symptoms of the problem—temporary accommodation—but less on prevention. It is great that we have the Homelessness Reduction Act—a brilliant piece of legislation—but we are spending less on prevention, which is not what Parliament wants. Homelessness is a scar on our society. We in this place are elected to do our job properly, to scrutinise the money and tackle this problem. Until we sort out our processes on things such as public expenditure scrutiny, we will never do that job properly.

3.27 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I am a vice president of the Local

[*Bob Blackman*]

Government Association, have a small property portfolio and was the sponsor of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, of which I am very proud.

I thank the previous speaker, the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), for bringing us back to the key issue, which is how the money is spent on the things we care about. As the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) alluded to, homelessness comes in many guises, but there are three predominant categories. The first are the people we see on our streets: the rough sleepers. The estimates vary, but between 4,000 and 9,000 people at any one time are sleeping rough on our streets. As has already been said, imagine what that must be like in weather such as this. It is a national scandal that a single individual in this country should be sleeping rough on our streets in this day and age.

Secondly, we have the temporary accommodation. Nearly 80,000 households and 120,000 children are in temporary accommodation, without a settled home. Probably even more important is the fact that 300,000 people are estimated to be sofa-surfing, staying with friends, or otherwise homeless.

We know that the causes of homelessness are varied. The predominant reason is the end of an assured shorthold tenancy, but there are other aspects such as relationship breakdown, unemployment, injury, sickness and, to a small extent, the welfare reductions that the Government have made. What we can say—and what is clear to me from the work that I have done with homeless people—is that every single homeless person is a unique case who will need careful treatment and assistance to return to a stable footing.

In 1977, for the first time, a Government legislated to impose duties in respect of homelessness and to prevent it from happening in this country. We look back on that now and wonder why no one had done it before, and I hope that in years to come people will look back on 2018 and say what a scandal it was that single homeless people were not assisted. At present, if families are threatened with homelessness and go to the local authority, they will be told—even today—to come back when they have been evicted. The crisis then occurs when they have been evicted: they go to the local housing office and are triaged, and if they are lucky they will be put in bed-and-breakfast or temporary accommodation, but they will not be given a new house. A single person will be told, “Go and sleep in a shop doorway or on a park bench, and if you are lucky you will be picked up by one of the charities under the No Second Night Out initiative. That is a scandal that we have to end.

I am delighted that on 3 April, this will all change once and for all. There will be a change of culture in our local authorities, and a change of culture in the way in which we treat homeless people. They will be able to go to the local authority 56 days before they are made homeless; they will then be sat down and a plan will be produced. Prevention is obviously better than cure, and I am also delighted that the Government have stumped up a total of £83 million towards implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act, which I piloted. However, my first ask of the Minister is “Please keep the money

under review.” We cannot allow circumstances to arise in which it runs out and local authorities do not deliver on their responsibility.

The 180 pages of guidance on implementing the Act that have been given to local authorities demonstrate the complexity of the change that we have made. The guidance issues a warning to authorities that there is a hook in the Act: if they do not change their culture a code of practice will be imposed, and they will be forced to act.

I note from what was said earlier by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon that the homelessness reduction taskforce has yet to meet. Will my hon. Friend the Minister—whom I congratulate on her appointment—update the House on when it will meet, and what its programme of action will be?

I am delighted that we have implemented the initial Housing First pilots. As other Members have pointed out, Housing First is a key way of assisting people who are sleeping rough. They are likely to be suffering from mental or physical health problems, drug or alcohol addictions or substance abuse, and they need a package of help. How long will the pilots last, and how quickly can we scale them up so that the whole country can benefit from them?

Finally, there is the issue of how we can assist people in the future. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), I lobbied for Help to Rent funding. I am delighted that the Chancellor allocated £20 million towards the project, but that is not enough. We need more, so that people who are hard pressed and cannot raise a deposit can find somewhere to live. In the long term the answer is longer tenancies, more housing and reducing the cost of temporary accommodation, but I commend my hon. Friend the Minister, and ask her to answer some of those questions when she winds up the debate.

3.33 pm

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): It is an honour to take part in the debate initiated by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), and, indeed, to follow the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), but it is important for us to remember when we are in this place that the power of Parliament is not just the power to debate. People do not care how much we know about the issues that affect their lives until they know how much we care, and that will be evidenced in our action. Those whom we are here to represent must always be at the forefront of what we say and do here, because otherwise we risk becoming a bureaucracy that is void of compassion. That is why action to increase funding must be taken.

My constituency is ranked 46th on Shelter’s list relating to people who are in temporary accommodation or sleeping rough. Every week, I meet people who do not have a place that they can call home. In fact, many of my constituents are unable to acquire and maintain regular, safe, secure and adequate housing. We have also heard about the homeless gentleman who passed away in Westminster station. Homelessness is not an aspiration. When we were younger and we thought about what we would like to do when we were older, becoming homeless and finding a piece of cardboard to sleep on in a shop entrance would not have come into the equation.

Sir Edward Davey: The hon. Lady is making an excellent point. Does she agree that the fact that the Housing Act 1996 describes people as “becoming homeless intentionally” is quite outrageous and offensive? Is not that the exact point that she is making?

Fiona Onasanya: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and I absolutely agree with him. I should also put on record that I was a commercial property solicitor before coming to this place. No one becomes homeless intentionally. I know that that Act looks at whether someone has taken steps to put themselves in a particular position, but no one takes steps to make themselves homeless. Someone could lose their job, for example, and be two months behind with their mortgage, or they could get into arrears with their rent and have their accommodation repossessed. Did they deliberately not pay their rent? No, there were factors that meant they did not have the funds to do so. I absolutely agree that no one is intentionally homeless.

Being or becoming homeless is an unintended consequence of many factors, and we are not doing enough to address that. Over £7 billion of cuts have been made to housing benefit support since 2010, with 13 separate cuts to housing benefit over the past eight years, including the bedroom tax and breaking the link between housing benefit for private renters—local housing allowance—and private rents. I believe that the 169% increase in rough sleepers since 2010 is a direct result of decisions made by Ministers in this place to reduce funding for homelessness services, and of a lack of action to help private renters.

The issue of homelessness has not been adequately funded, and there has been a steep drop in investment. I understand that the Government are looking at being fiscally minded, as the hon. Member for Harrow East said, and paying attention to what they are spending, but we seriously need to invest to save in this regard. This is the sixth richest country in the world, and we cannot have people sleeping on doorsteps who are unable to look after themselves and who have nowhere to call home. We cannot have people who are sleeping on sofas falling through the gaps because they are not considered homeless. That is unacceptable. We have a chance here to make a difference and to do something. We have a chance to invest in lives, because we are here to serve people. If we forget that, we have forgotten who we really are.

3.38 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. I have been looking at homelessness and its associated problems for a number of years. For four years, I was director of policy at the Centre for Social Justice, which looks at the root causes of poverty in the UK. We specialised in looking at long-term worklessness, addiction, educational failure, serious personal debt and the like. One of the things we discovered when looking at those problems, each of which can cause subsequent problems and hold people back, was that even when people had a lot else that was going right in their life, those other points of stability were undermined if they did not have a stable home.

That is one of the reasons why it has been so depressing to see homelessness creeping up. We know that the problem has a number of root causes, and it is good to

see the Government starting to get to grips with them. First, there is an over-inflated housing market in parts of our country. The price of property, particularly for rental, is simply too high. As Members on both sides of the House have said, this has led to instances of young families who are in work finding that they cannot afford to get themselves back into the rental market when they fall out. People who are doing all the right things find themselves trapped outside the rental market for want of an up-front payment. Also, house prices are far too high in certain centres of population.

All that is why it is so important that the Government continue their major investment in home building. The £44 billion announced by the Chancellor in last year's Budget will go a long way towards solving the long-term supply problem in our housing market. I am very proud that the Government have set themselves the excellent ambition of getting 300,000 new homes a year built. We must get on top of that as quickly as possible, and it is very good that the start-up figures show we are moving in that direction.

There are also more complex problems that lead to people falling out of even temporary accommodation and on to the streets. These are problems of mental health, addiction and entrenched issues that are not always dealt with in a timely fashion. That is why we need to back the pilots the Government are putting money into. Housing First was championed in a report by the Centre for Social Justice—it was after I left; I cannot take any credit for it. It showed that when such a policy had been implemented in Belgium, Finland and parts of the USA, meaning that housing accommodation was given to people first—rather than treatment first, which is still the predominant model—it gave homeless people the base that they need if treatment is to work. It gave them stable foundations so that they could fix the other problems in their lives and stay off the street permanently. That has to be the right approach. We need to create an environment that makes it possible for people to overcome complex mental health problems and complex problems of addiction. The street is simply not the right environment in which to do that, and I would go so far as to say that many of our current hostels and places of supported housing are also not the right environment. We need a much more secure base for those most vulnerable people.

The housing first initiative in Finland, which my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) mentioned, has led to a dramatic reduction in the number of people who are homeless or sleeping rough since 2008. In its first seven years, homelessness in Finland fell by 35%, which was a remarkable achievement. We will all be looking to the pilots in Manchester, Liverpool and the west midlands.

While dwelling on Housing First, I always think of a chap called Wayne, whom I came across in north London. He had been in the Army. He left with post-traumatic stress disorder and ended up on the streets within a year, and he had stayed on the streets for the better part of a decade. During that time, he had been in and out of the court system on account of stealing so that he could fuel his alcohol problem. Within six months of his having come under the Housing First initiative, he had started to receive mental health treatment and treatment for his alcohol problems. Within a year, he was staying out of the court system entirely, and

[Alex Burghart]

now he has moved into work and a private rental settlement of his own. This intervention is the future; it is absolutely right that the Government are backing it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. With apologies to the hon. Gentleman who is about to speak for the short notice I am giving him, I am afraid that I must reduce the time limit from six minutes to four minutes.

3.44 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am perhaps unnaturally excited about taking part in an estimates debate. When I first picked up the estimates document earlier on, I thought that it was a private Member's Bill speech by the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). However, I am genuinely very delighted to take part in the debate, not least because I am a member of the Procedure Committee, which has helped to drive this change in parliamentary practice, alongside my hon. Friends the Members for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), and for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). It is also because I get to sit alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North, who has the ability to combine the subjects of budgets and procedure, so the stars have truly aligned this afternoon.

I want to focus my remarks on expenditure on housing and the need for another John Wheatley, who is one of my predecessors. The late, great John Wheatley served as the MP for my constituency from 1922 to 1930. Two wonderful things happened in 1924. First, the greatest football club in the history of the earth, Airdrieonians, won the Scottish cup, but, more seriously, John Wheatley was appointed Health Minister and pioneered an enormous expansion of social housing through the Housing (Financial Provisions) Act 1924. That legislation allowed central Government to provide subsidies to build public housing. It was a small but significant step that saw over half a million council homes built by 1933. Today, sadly, in 2018, the UK still faces a housing crisis, and it is in that regard that I want to address Government policy and spending on housing.

I very much welcome the Government's signal by renaming—and indeed upgrading—the Department for Communities and Local Government as the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, but I hope that a name change is not all we will see with regard to housing, because what we need from this Government is a radical change on housing policy. I believe, just as John Wheatley did, that everything stems from the provision of warm, safe and affordable housing. That is why I want the Government to spend even more money on housing, and it is why I want them to abolish the right to buy entirely. The two cannot be done in isolation. Without following both policies, we essentially operate with one hand tied behind our backs, as Members in England will know. I am very glad that Welsh Labour has followed the SNP Government's commitment to abolish the right to buy. I am not sure whether that is official Labour party policy in Westminster, but it certainly should be.

It is important to note that housing is a devolved competence in Scotland. We have now delivered nearly 71,000 affordable homes in Scotland since taking office 11 years ago. Indeed, we have a very ambitious target of building 50,000 extra affordable homes by 2021, 35,000 of which will be for social rent. I saw a number of those at Gallowgate only last week. Because we do not sell off our council housing, that allows us to make a dent in tackling the demand for social housing, which is something that Margaret Thatcher failed at spectacularly. In stark contrast, in June last year *The Guardian* reported that in England council homes are being sold off almost three times faster than local authorities can replace them, so the Government must do more on housing. It is deeply concerning that the Department has surrendered £742 million to HM Treasury for other housing schemes.

In my remaining 40 seconds, I want to address devolution deals. It is interesting to note in the estimates that other large reductions in the resource departmental expenditure limit include a surrender from the Department to HM Treasury of £74 million that had been earmarked for devolution deals. It has not gone unnoticed in Scotland that the Scottish Government seem to consistently outspend the paltry amounts offered by the UK Government to Scottish regions for regional or city deals. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North shares my disdain for the paltry amount served up, with a shortfall of £250,000 for the Aberdeen and shire city deal. Indeed, my hon. Friends from Ayrshire are still wondering when their growth deal will come. I want to see more support for city deals—

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman talks about shortfalls for city deals. Does he recognise that it is the Scottish Government's reticence that is stopping money from coming to the city deal for Stirling and Clackmannanshire, as well as the Tay cities deal?

David Linden: No, I do not, so I will move on, but I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving at least something to Scotland—an extra minute.

Above all, I want to see a new John Wheatley at the Government Dispatch Box investing in social housing and abolishing the right to buy. If we do that, when we come back to debate estimates on housing expenditure in future years, we will start to see progress—real progress—in tackling the UK's housing crisis.

3.48 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I want to whizz through an excellent partnership between YMCA Birmingham and the Government in providing accommodation for young, formerly homeless people. I spent an excellent three years of my working life working for YMCA Birmingham. It has been in existence since 1849, so it did not need my help to continue working—it had obviously been doing a grand job of work for a considerable amount of time. During those three years, and immediately before and immediately afterwards, the Government offered YMCA Birmingham tremendous support through what might seem to be a lexicon of the funding available. Indeed, YMCA Birmingham seems to have been particularly lucky. Alan Fraser, the chief executive who appointed me, is obviously a very wise man, and the organisation's success is partly down to his brilliance.

When I joined the organisation, it had just been given £450,000 of empty homes money. The Government had provided £100 million through two separate rounds of funding to bring buildings that had been lying empty for a number of years back into use as accommodation. I understand that thousands of properties across the country would benefit from such funding, if the Government were to initiate it again. We probably do not hear much about that because lots of those buildings are outside London—clearly our focus is largely only in London. Would it not be lovely if we could look north to the midlands and beyond, and share some of the money universally? We used the £450,000 to bring a former social care building back into use. We converted the building to create 33 units of fairly self-contained accommodation—just three of the properties shared kitchen facilities.

During my tenure we also received £1 million in affordable homes money to create the Chris Bryant centre and the Vineyard in Erdington, with 33 flats of mostly single-bed accommodation. Also on that site, although not funded by the Government, we had a training and conference facility and a café, because the YMCA is diversifying its offering into social entrepreneurship to raise money to help to subsidise the excellent housing it provides.

Perhaps most importantly for this debate, the YMCA was also granted money through the homelessness change and platform for life funds to modernise its 72-bed hostel in Northfield, which I am sure the Minister will be visiting with me very soon—it would be lovely if she would just smile and say yes.

The hostel's facilities were euphemistically described as "study rooms"—10 square metre rooms that had space for only a bed and a table. Twenty of those rooms have now been converted to include en suite accommodation. Money has been provided for training facilities on the site, and for health visitors to visit previously homeless people on site. Their chaotic lifestyles sometimes mean it is difficult to persuade them to get to a GP, so why not bring the health visitors to them? Government funding has allowed that to happen, so let us not say that this Conservative Government do not support the homeless and the provision of services in all tenures across the UK.

3.52 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Who would choose to spend £845 million of taxpayers' money on poor, shabby, terrible temporary accommodation that is often never checked by local authorities? I could tell the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) about all sorts of guidance on how local authorities should act, but none of that guidance is enforced or checked. Families are living in accommodation for which we would never wish to pay.

That £845 million could be better spent on thousands of modular homes—prefabs—that would allow people to be warm, dry and able to pay their rent. The estimates also show us that £72 million for affordable homes is to be handed back to Her Majesty's Treasury by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government because the money is no longer needed.

Who in this House believes that that £72 million is not needed for affordable homes? If the Government do not feel they need it, they should give it to me. Let me

spend it. I will spend it on 1,333 genuinely affordable modular homes. I can find the sites; I can suggest where we can do it. I promise the House that I can get £124 million spent by 1 April on real homes that people need.

We have so many of these debates, with lots of warm words and good intentions, but with not one house built. The time has come to get building. The time has come for each Member to pressurise their local authorities to release the land they are sitting on for social housing and to make sure that doing so is a priority—it currently is not for most local authorities. The time has come to talk about the green belt, most of which is not green and is not beautiful, and could be built on. There is enough land around London stations to build 1 million new homes if we chose to do it. The question is: do we choose to?

Bob Blackman: The hon. Lady reminds me that I piloted a Bill through this place to enable Transport for London to do precisely what she is asking for. Will she therefore join us in calling on the Mayor of London to do the job that he is elected to do and build new homes?

Siobhain McDonagh: I will do everything I can to encourage the Mayor to do that, but it is not just about the Mayor; it is also about the Government and local authorities. It is about how serious we really are about building homes, attacking shibboleths such as the green belt, and forcing local authorities to use the sites they have not to generate cash, but to build homes. It is about what our priorities are. Having sat in all these debates, I suggest that when it comes to it, we do not really want to do this. It can be done and it should be done, but it is up to us whether or not we choose to do it.

3.56 pm

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak in this debate on a subject I am so passionate about. In Britain, we are famous for moaning about the weather, especially this week, but it is unbelievable that in this day and age thousands in our country have to endure it without a roof over their heads. That is why I have been working to reduce homelessness, and why I think the Government's target to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and eliminate it by 2027 is so important. We need to tackle it with a multi-layered approach, because it is vital that we do not over-simplify the problem and its solution.

I represent a lovely constituency, which I believe is the loveliest pocket of Wiltshire. It is one that people would not necessarily associate with homelessness, yet it is a problem there. There are an estimated 147 rough sleepers in Wiltshire, but the official figures do not always paint the full picture; they use only one night and do not cover all of Wiltshire. In addition, we too often associate homelessness only with rough sleeping, yet it also includes sofa surfing and those in temporary accommodation. I stress that homelessness is not just a problem confined to the cities; it also affects market towns and villages. The problem might be more stark in London and other cities, but one homeless person is one too many.

At this point, I must commend the work of our local charity Doorway, which is based in Chippenham and whose role is essential, as the support and help it gives

[Michelle Donelan]

local people is invaluable. In addition, I should mention the work of our local Salvation Army, which has offered support to me in dealing with cases, including by taking calls and offering care packages late at night.

I am a firm believer that when it comes to homelessness, prevention is key, which is why I was so proud to support the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. It will end the current postcode lottery in provision, and I agree with the chief executive of Crisis, who described it as

“a crucial step...in fighting homelessness”.

It will make the system fairer, and it will mean that we will stop having to wait until it is too late; instead we will start to prevent homelessness, with personalised housing plans and support.

Crucially, there is evidence to suggest that a number of secondary issues are often triggered by homelessness, such as mental health issues, alcohol addiction and drug dependency, and so preventing homelessness will also prevent these problems. Homelessness is complex and needs a multi-layered approach to tackle it, so I welcome the more than £1 billion that has been allocated to tackling homelessness through to 2020, but it is important to note that homelessness is increasing. It is therefore vital that we tackle it head on with an ambitious multi-layered approach, which is why I back the Government's actions.

I stress again the importance of not over-simplifying the solutions to a complex problem. We must look at homelessness in the round: putting money into mental health, financial education, debt support and the like will contribute to that. Colleagues have touched on the idea of a Housing First scheme, and I echo their sentiments in saying that I would like the Minister to speed up the rolling-out process.

Because of the time limit, I shall conclude swiftly and not mention my other valid points. Although there is a long way to go, I very much support the Government's taking action to deal with this complex problem by addressing the solution in the round.

4 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Never did I think we would have to debate this issue after the work Labour did to reduce homelessness. [Interruption.] We are talking about people's lives, so I do not need cheap comments from Conservative Members.

I want to put the Government under proper scrutiny, first by asking them why they think it is acceptable to halve homelessness by 2022 and abolish it by 2027—why not this year? People need housing now. We have heard how successful Housing First is and the academic evidence supports that. I am particularly proud of the work done by the University of York's Professor Nicholas Pleace. He has highlighted how successful the scheme has been. Pilots have been carried out in Finland, Norway and Denmark; let us implement the policy now and change the life chances of so many people.

I wish to dig into some of the numbers, because I have some serious questions to ask about the allocation for housing programmes in the Budget. Why is so much money being allocated to Help to Buy? Two thirds of this year's housing budget is expected to be spent on the

Help to Buy scheme. What scrutiny has there been of the programme? Some £3.6 billion has been spent on it in 2017-18, and it is predicted that it will be £4.6 billion in 2018-19, £5.1 billion in 2019-20 and £5.6 billion in 2020-21. I ask because only 57 households in my constituency have benefited under the scheme, yet shares in Persimmon have rocketed, giving its bosses bonuses worth half a billion pounds, with the chief executive officer getting £112 million. Just 4% of that bonus could have solved the homelessness problem in my constituency, where homelessness has gone up by 15 times since 2010.

Homelessness is such a serious issue in my constituency. We have had zero new social housing units and no housing built altogether in the past two quarters. The only homes that have gone up since 2015 have been luxury apartments. That does nothing for the people of my city. We have not only street homelessness but lots of people living in inappropriate accommodation. I have seen in my constituency a mum who has to sleep on the floor next to her kids in the bunk beds, in a five-by-four room. I have seen a mum and dad who have to sleep on a single mattress in another cramped five-by-four room, with a cot, a baby on the way and nowhere to go unless they present themselves as intentionally homeless. I agree with the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) that that is a disgraceful term, because nobody is intentionally homeless. We need to put in place a Housing First policy to address these serious issues.

I call on the Minister to work with her Department to reject York's proposed local plan. A site was allocated for family housing, but only 3% of it will be affordable, let alone provide the social housing that we need. In fact, the local plan presented to the Government seriously undercuts the number of housing units needed and does not address the serious situation in the city, where housing is completely unaffordable. The average rental price is £853 per calendar month, so people who are not intentionally homeless cannot access any housing whatsoever. They certainly cannot consider the housing ladder. I urge the Minister to look into this situation.

4.4 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) in this important debate. There are so many different issues that affect people's lives and cause homelessness, but rough sleeping is particularly complex. I am thinking of those people who are out on the streets in this appalling weather, and indeed throughout the year. There are so many factors, ranging from mental health problems to family breakdown.

We must recognise that the family is the source of our health, wealth and education, so it is such a loss when someone loses their family home. That is why the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) has done through the Centre for Social Justice is so important, because having a home is the foundation on which we build all our other support networks. We all need that stability and security. That is clearly a problem for adults and parents, but growing up in an unstable home environment is especially difficult for children, as it is so much more difficult for them to reach out to get the help they need.

Homelessness often leads to mental health problems and to drug and alcohol problems. There is a particular problem with the increasing use of the drug Spice, which is cheap and readily available but has such a negative impact on people. The police must do more to crack down on the sale of Spice, which does so much damage.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the problems is that Spice is categorised as a class B drug, rather than class A, despite its impact?

Chris Green: The right approach by the police will naturally follow the right categorisation, so the clear suggestion is that Spice ought to be re-categorised as a class A drug, so that law enforcement agencies respond appropriately.

I want to take this opportunity to recognise the valuable work that Bolton Council and Wigan Council do to tackle homelessness in my constituency, and the important work done by charities such as Urban Outreach. The charity Crisis has recognised what the Government are doing, stating: "Crisis supports the commitment made by the Government to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. In the Budget there were welcome announcements of further funding on homelessness." That recognition of money going to the right place is welcome. Bolton is set to receive an additional £187,000 over the next three years, which is very welcome. On a recent visit to Greater Manchester, the Prime Minister committed another £1.8 million to end rough sleeping, and a further £1 billion overall has been allocated to tackle homelessness, running up to 2020.

The Government are doing their part, but local government also needs to do its part. Councils have an important role to play, because they are closest to the communities affected. It is really important that they do their job. We must also consider our new metro Mayors. I am pleased to recognise the commitment made by the Mayor of Greater Manchester to eradicating rough sleeping across the city by 2020. That is an incredibly important commitment. He will work with charities, churches, businesses and local government across Greater Manchester to achieve that, but also with national Government.

We must also recognise that the initial Greater Manchester spatial framework, which was intended to ensure that infrastructure and housing is developed in tandem, was not fit for purpose. There was far too much urban sprawl of three, four or five-bedroom semi-detached and detached houses, which will not solve the problem of homelessness and rough sleeping. We have to ensure that the right housing is built in the right locations.

I am pleased that the Government have committed to halving rough sleeping by 2022, and eliminating it by 2027. I look forward to their taking inspiration from the work that the Mayor of Greater Manchester will do to eradicate it by 2020.

4.9 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green).

Since 2010, rough sleeping has risen by 169% nationally and the number of households accepted as homeless has increased by a half. Incredibly, for the sixth largest

economy in the world approaching the third decade of the 21st century, there are now 120,000 children living in temporary accommodation. Two weeks ago the desperate issue of rough sleeping was made urgent and immediate to this House with the tragic death of Marcos Amaral Gourgel just yards from this place. This came just four short weeks after the equally tragic death of a woman in my constituency of Warwick and Leamington.

This may come as something of a shock to many in this place, but the reality is that Warwick district is the worst for homelessness in the whole of the west midlands, according to Government figures. In fact, in 2015-16 the local district council received 705 applications as statutory homeless, of which only 172 were accepted. This is against a housing waiting list of around 2,500 people.

We are witnessing a humanitarian crisis on our streets. Rough sleeping and homelessness are in nearly every community, as we have heard from Members across the Chamber. It is clear that the causes of this crisis are many and complex, but fundamental to tackling the explosion in rough sleeping, as many Members have said, is the urgent need to build enough housing of the right mix and in the right place. I accept that there has been a failure of successive Governments to build enough housing, but the crisis has really developed in the past few years and been fuelled by the savage cuts to welfare.

The challenge to build sufficient housing needs greater ambition than that proposed by the Chancellor. Although 300,000 new homes a year may sound impressive, the harsh fact is that less than 2% of new builds will be council homes. Likewise, it was welcomed when the Prime Minister announced last September a £2 billion fund to invest in social housing—equating to just 25,000 homes—but it was also clear that the ambition was perhaps not enough against the true need.

I am committed to working to tackle this problem in my constituency and, by extension, nationally. Although I may not be able to alleviate the financial pressures of those who have seen cuts to their housing benefit, employment support allowance, personal independence payment or other support, I am determined to bring together all professional agencies and authorities to bring an end to this crisis in Warwick and Leamington. The target of 2027 is too late. As in Manchester, I really want us to resolve this—collectively and collaboratively—by 2020. In just two weeks I will hold a meeting with all those bodies, including mental health, homelessness, addiction and recovery charities, the two local authorities and a manufacturer of low-cost prefabricated modular housing. I found the comments of the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) and my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) particularly pertinent to that point.

Land is critical. I have said before that we must insist on or urge a change whereby local authorities are compelled to use their land exclusively for council and social housing. The truth is that the public are angry at the inaction of the Government in resolving this situation with urgency. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 promoted by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) is to be applauded, but the woeful lack of urgent action by the Government to eliminate rough sleeping before 2027 is viewed by the public as a disgrace.

Critical now, as we have heard, is building council housing on an industrial scale. There have been just 47 council homes built in Warwick and Leamington

[*Matt Western*]

since 2010. We must provide temporary refuge and accommodation for those sleeping on the streets, and ensure that mental health and addiction services are properly funded and that we put money back into Supporting People budgets, which have fallen by 45% since 2010. Finally—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman cannot have a “finally”. He may have two words to conclude.

Matt Western: Two words? Thursday sees the relaunch of the cross-party group on council housing. All hon. Members are very welcome to join us.

4.14 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to be able to speak in this debate about a challenge that has been particularly discussed in my constituency over the past few days.

We must look at how we quantify the challenge. At the moment, most of the statistics come from the rough sleeping counts, which date back to the Victorian era: the idea of walking around—a bit like a train spotter, but for vulnerable people—trying to spot people sleeping rough. If someone visibly might be homeless but is standing up in a doorway, they would not count and the process tells us nothing other than the numbers out there. For me, the statistics gained are pretty useless and can vary massively.

When I was deputy leader of Coventry City Council, it was supposed to have done brilliantly in addressing homelessness one year. We said that that was because we did not think the organisation that did the rough sleeper count had done a particularly good job, and a year later the number went up. That was not because anyone felt that the numbers had hugely increased but partly because of how the count was done, which was completely archaic.

I very much welcome what was done under the Torbay “End Street Homelessness” campaign and the proper connections week survey that it undertook recently. Volunteers spent a week on the streets interviewing people sleeping rough to find out why they were there and to treat them as individuals and humans, not as someone they had spotted from a distance. The process has produced useful statistics—actually a slightly higher number than the official rough sleeper count—and something that we can work on.

Then there is the campaign featured in the national media today: the “fake homeless” campaign, which the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) referred to in an intervention. A lot of the campaign comes out of frustration with the current legislation, which is woefully out of date. The Vagrancy Act 1824 was passed in a completely different era. In theory, it criminalises someone for sleeping rough, which none of us would consider an offence—the act of sleeping rough should not make someone a criminal. The legislation’s provisions regarding those who beg, and some who beg when they do not need to, do not reflect the modern era and leave the police and others without useful tools. Yes, it is possible to use public spaces protection orders and more modern legislation, but the 1824 Act has long since had its day and urgently needs reform.

There has been significant debate about the “fake homeless” campaign, but there have been other examples. Police in Ely recently said that all beggars there were fake, and last year Middlesbrough Council identified nine fake beggars. Before people think that the campaign was launched by people who do not care about this issue or are particularly heartless, I should say that an organisation called Humanity Torbay launched it—a homelessness charity that has helped hundreds of people. The campaign was born of a frustration at the fact that the legal tools to deal with those who seek to defraud the public are so out of date as to be nearly useless.

The issue, of course, needs to be considered carefully; I accept that any change in the law must only be made in a way that protects the genuinely vulnerable out on the streets. But from what I have seen in the Bay, and having been out on patrol with Torquay’s neighbourhood policing team on Saturday night, I can say that people do not have the tools they need. That is why the legislation needs reform.

I welcome the work that has been done. I certainly welcome the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which is due to come into force on 1 April. However, the issue is not just about support but about a legislative framework that gives organisations the right tools.

4.18 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Madam Deputy Speaker, it is unusual and noteworthy for the three Front Benchers all to be female in a House of Commons debate. Not only that, but so are the Chair and the hon. Members for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), who secured the debate. That is unusual and I am pleased that it has occurred as we approach International Women’s Day.

The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) made an excellent speech about the fact that we are debating the estimates without the information from the Government that we should have if we are to properly scrutinise budgets and departmental spending. If we look at either the supplementary or main estimates, we cannot coherently read across how much money is being spent on homelessness or how much of the money committed in any of the estimates is relevant for Barnett consequential. That information could be made much clearer in the estimates booklet.

I welcome the changes to the estimates procedure, with the Backbench Business Committee rather than the Liaison Committee being the one to choose the subjects for debate. It was nice of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) to mention the work that I and my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) have done on this, and I am pleased that the House is moving forward. However, I am clear that much more change needs to occur in order for proper budgetary scrutiny to take place.

This has been an incredibly wide-ranging debate that I hope has given the Minister a lot to think about, particularly on the causes of homelessness and the ways to reduce it. One point that has not been mentioned at much length is the lack of recourse to public funds. That is a major issue in my constituency. Homelessness charities such as Aberdeen Cyrenians and Shelter are bringing up the issue of people who have no recourse to public funds and therefore find themselves homeless.

That is a specific issue for those who are fleeing domestic violence, and I would be grateful if the Minister had a look at it. Women's refuges do not get housing support payments for women who are fleeing domestic violence if they have no recourse to public funds. We should not be making women and families who are fleeing domestic violence homeless simply because they have no recourse to public funds. I do not think that that is the Government's intention, but I would very much appreciate it if the Government looked at that. It is particularly the case for EU nationals. It has previously been an issue for those from outside the EU, who have had a bit of a grace period, but for EU nationals there is no grace period, and an increasing number of them are being given "no recourse to public funds" status.

Right to buy has been raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East and a number of other Members. In Scotland we no longer have right to buy. That is incredibly important and has made a huge difference. I was a local authority councillor from 2007 to 2015, and the vast majority of my casework involved people who were on the waiting list and struggling to get a council house.

One thing that has not been discussed very much in relation to right to buy is the fact that 40% of the properties that have been sold off by councils are now in the private rented sector. Because a number of those involve housing benefit, the Government are having to pay more money for the same properties than if they had not allowed right to buy. It is a ridiculous situation and not one that the Government should continue with. Far be it from me to tell another country what to do with its policies, but if the Government want to tackle homelessness, looking at right to buy would be a really good way to go.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East mentioned some of the things we have done in Scotland. We are building a huge number of affordable houses, and importantly, we are spending three times more per head of population on our affordable housing supply programme than the UK Government are spending on their affordable homes programme. That is why we are managing to increase the number of social houses we have and why we are managing to improve the situation in Scotland, to ensure that more people have a secure roof over their head.

We have also taken significant action on homelessness and rough sleeping. Our programme for government in Scotland specifically mentioned a £50 million fund over five years. In terms of the estimates, the more money the Government give to devolved matters, the more we receive in Barnett consequentials. It would be incredibly positive if the Government were to properly tackle this issue and put funding into it.

A number of Members have talked about the causes of homelessness. People are falling through the cracks, and that is partly because of the benefits system set up by the Government. We have a system which means that people need to get back into work very quickly, but some people with the most complex needs and addiction problems who do not have a roof over their head are not going to get back into work in six months, 12 months or even two years, because they need intensive support over a very long period.

Last time I was in a debate such as this, a number of Members said, "There but for the grace of God go I," and that is absolutely the case. People have not necessarily made any more bad choices than I have in my lifetime, but because of their circumstances, their bad choices have resulted in them being homeless. More needs to be done to recognise that they are just the same as us and have not made any more bad choices; it is just that they have had more bad luck than we have.

4.24 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Members for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) on securing this really important debate. It is incredibly important, as has been brought home to us this week, more than most others, because of the terrible weather we are having.

We all know that visible forms of homelessness have increased. We cannot walk around any town or city centre without seeing people bedding down for the night in doorways and makeshift shelters. In fact, when I walked down St Matthew Street in London this morning, I passed two rough sleepers who had all their belongings in a doorway. Given that I had been talking about affordable housing at an agency that is coming up with housing policies, I thought how perverse it was then to be walking past people sleeping rough in the street.

We know that on any given night last year about 4,500 people were sleeping rough on the streets of England—a 170% rise since 2010. I say "about 4,500" because we still do not have any method of accurately recording the numbers of people sleeping rough on our streets up and down the country. Until we get such a method, we cannot accurately address the scale of this problem.

As has already been said, the fact that people are dying on the streets of Britain in 2018 is entirely unacceptable. On Friday morning, however, a man named Rob O'Connor was found dead in Chelmsford, as temperatures dipped below freezing, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) mentioned, just the other week a man died outside Westminster tube station. In this bitterly cold weather, most of us are able to wrap up warm and return to our houses, but rough sleepers do not have the most basic options. It is absolutely clear that we must find genuine solutions to this 21st-century scandal.

There are now over 120,000 children living in temporary accommodation. The four-year freeze of the local housing allowance that started in 2016 has, according to Shelter's research, the potential to put over 1 million households at risk of homelessness by 2020, so are the Government seriously planning against all eventualities that may arise? As was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and, very eloquently, by my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), the supplementary estimates have revealed that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has surrendered £72 million of funding for affordable homes. That money could have built 1,000 social rented homes.

There are a range of reasons why people become homeless. The most common are a breakdown of relationships with family, friends or spouse; mental or physical health problems, as my hon. Friend the Member

[*Melanie Onn*]

for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) said; alcohol and drug addiction; and being unable to find anywhere to live on leaving care, hospital, prison and the armed forces. The Harbour Place homelessness charity has been operating the SWEP—severe weather emergency protocol—process every night since 28 January in my constituency. It tells me that many of its service users say they became homeless after having their benefits sanctioned or withdrawn. That issue was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya).

The assessment that there is a clear link between welfare cuts and homelessness is supported by the National Audit Office. It has said:

“The ending of private sector tenancies has overtaken all other causes to become the biggest single driver of statutory homelessness in England.”

The number of households made homeless by the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy trebled between 2009-10 and 2016-17—from 11% to 32%.

Labour has a plan to solve the scourge of homelessness. We would make 8,000 homes available for those with a history of rough sleeping. We would increase security for private renters with new three-year tenancies and controls on rent. We would have a Prime Minister-led taskforce on ending rough sleeping and tackling homelessness, and we would build thousands more affordable homes to rent.

We have got a plan, but what have the Government given us? They inherited from the previous Labour Government a trend of falling homelessness, with what was described by the independent Crisis and Joseph Rowntree Foundation homelessness monitor as an “unprecedented decline in statutory homelessness”.

They have squandered that, with a 48% increase in the number of statutory homeless households; a 59% increase in the number of households in temporary accommodation, such as bed and breakfasts, hostels and refuges; and—at under 1,000 last year, compared with nearly 40,000 in 2009-10—a record low number of Government-funded homes for social rent.

I would like to use the few moments remaining to me to ask the Minister a few questions. First, how can the Government say that they are tackling the housing crisis when they have handed back £742 million to the Treasury—all related to housing schemes? Why has that not been spent? Why was it allocated in the first place? As has been highlighted, £560 million of that was for private ownership schemes; does that really address the issue of homelessness?

I have made a list. Rough sleeping, as my hon. Friends the Members for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) and for Birmingham, Edgbaston both highlighted, was reduced significantly under the Labour Government. On temporary accommodation, my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) talked about the excellent work being undertaken in Wales by the Labour-led Government under Carwyn Jones. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) talked about the issues of funding for supported accommodation. Other issues include Housing First; public health; mental health; social housing; affordable housing; healthcare and the life expectancy of people

living on the streets; minority group issues, particularly LGBT support run by charities such as the Albert Kennedy Trust; housing benefit, with about £10 billion of housing benefit going directly into the private sector and not being invested in social housing; skills in the building industry—

Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Melanie Onn: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman did not put his name down to speak at the appropriate time, but he should plan his time better.

My list also includes the number of planners in local government, property as a commodity rather than a home in the community and empty homes. All these issues have been raised by Members across the House, and it strikes me that much more should be done cross-departmentally between the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department for Work and Pensions. Are there any plans to undertake cross-departmental work to address the issue in the round? Is the Minister satisfied that local government has been provided with sufficient resources properly and fully to deliver the Homelessness Reduction Act? Finally, if she is so committed to the homelessness agenda why has the homelessness reduction taskforce not yet met?

4.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to wind up this important debate this afternoon. As the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) noticed, an estimates day motion has not been voted against since 1919, so I am sure that we will continue that fantastic tradition today.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) on opening this afternoon's debate, as well as the 33 Members who have contributed. This topic is one of supreme importance and I know that it is close to all our hearts. I am appreciative of the experiences and expertise shared today, whether from a constituency or a wider perspective. I also remind Members of my entry in the Ministers' register of interests. I shall try to answer many of the questions I have been asked.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have repeatedly been clear that one person without a home is one too many. That is why the Government have set an ambitious target to halve rough sleeping over this Parliament and eliminate it altogether by 2027. Now, given many of the recent stories and the personal experiences shared today, I am aware that that is no small feat. The scale and the nature of the problem is large, but I want to ensure the House today that this ambition is about more than just words. The Government are taking groundbreaking steps through spending programmes, legislative reform and cross-Government working to ensure that we are funding solutions to create long-term change while backing key programmes that are working.

We have allocated more than £1 billion to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping over the spending review period. This includes—the list is by no means

exhaustive—£316 million of local authority prevention funding agreed as part of the local government finance statement, and £402 million in flexible homelessness support grant funding for local authorities over 2017-18 and 2018-19, with further spending for 2019-20 to be announced shortly. I reiterate: more money will be announced shortly. This up-front grant funding is giving local authorities the flexibility to tackle homelessness strategically in their local area. There was the £100 million agreed at Budget 2016 to deliver low-cost “move on” accommodation for rough sleepers leaving hostel accommodation and people leaving refuges, and a further £215 million for central Government programmes.

Adam Holloway: Does the Minister not think it a no-brainer that if successive Governments continue with very high levels of immigration and fail to build houses, we are going to have a problem? I lived homeless in London for three months for a television programme. Nearly 50% of homeless in London are from eastern Europe and there are horrendous hostels which are totally unsuitable for mentally ill and drug-addicted people. Unless we deal with the underlying causes of street homelessness we will get nowhere near to solving the problem.

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend for sharing his life with us. It is very interesting how we all have different experiences and bring them to bear in this House. I thank him for those comments.

The £215 million for central Government programmes features a range of innovative programmes and funding mechanisms designed to hit the problems square on. For example, we have allocated £28 million to fund three Housing First pilots for the most entrenched rough sleepers. Housing First is an internationally established approach to ending homelessness for people with complex needs. It works on the principle that, first and foremost, an individual is found a home and then provided services to tackle the cause. It is not a new approach for the Finnish, who are the only country in Europe to see homelessness fall in recent years.

The funding also includes our £50 million homelessness prevention programme to provide innovative approaches to reducing homelessness, with prevention at its heart. This is comprised of a £20 million rough sleeping fund to help new rough sleepers, or people at imminent risk of sleeping rough, to get the rapid support they need to recover and move on from a rough sleeping crisis; a £10 million fund for social impact bonds to provide targeted support, over a different eight local authorities, for entrenched rough sleepers; and £20 million for local authorities to trial new initiatives to help people who are at risk of homelessness long before they reach crisis point. Across all three funds we are supporting 84 projects, encompassing 205 district and unitary authorities up and down the country, to ensure that more people have tailored support to avoid becoming homeless in the first place and have the rapid support they need to make a sustainable recovery from homelessness.

We know that a challenge for those who are homeless is access to tenancies in the private rented sector. That is why we announced at Budget funding of £20 million for schemes that will enable better access to new private rented sector tenancies or support in sustaining tenancies for those who are, or are at risk of becoming, homeless or rough sleeping.

On some of the specifics of the Department's estimates for the 2017-18 financial year, our re-profiling of £9.1 million of the flexible homelessness support grant will enable us to support increased collaboration between London boroughs on the procurement of accommodation for homeless households, in particular with regard to temporary accommodation. The work required to set up a new procurement strategy and vehicle means that the funding cannot be spent this year, but will be required in 2018-19. A further £15.6 billion has been re-profiled for future years and preserved, so there is no reduction of the £25 million. There is also, specifically, £2 billion for housing associations to build social housing.

David Linden: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Mrs Wheeler: No, I won't.

It is important that in allocating this funding we measure the effectiveness of our investment. To do that the Department, with the support of external partners, will be undertaking and publishing a range of evaluations of the different schemes we fund. More broadly, the Department, along with the DWP, will be undertaking new research into the drivers that cause homelessness and rough sleeping. That will enable us to better assess the impacts of Government intervention and inform future policymaking in this area.

We all know that money alone is not the answer. We need to be searching for new solutions to entrenched problems. This is why just last week I was proud to sign The Homelessness (Review Procedure etc.) Regulations 2018, which enact key provisions in the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 from 3 April 2018. I am sure Members will agree that the Act is a transformative piece of legislation that significantly reforms England's homelessness legislation. Placing duties on local authorities to intervene at earlier stages is a key preventive step to reduce homelessness in local areas.

We are keen to ensure local housing authorities are equipped to deliver these changes. Last week, we launched our new “Homelessness Code of Guidance”, a comprehensive guide for local authorities on how to exercise new functions introduced by the Act, alongside existing statutory responsibilities. Of course, we have already agreed £72.7 million of new burdens funding, payable to all councils over the spending review period, and a commitment to review this going forward. I am exceptionally proud of the work that has gone into delivering these changes—the work of the Department and of my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) before me—and as ever, I remain grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for all his endeavours.

However, there is clearly more to do. As we prepare for the Act to come into force in spring, I am now chairing regular meetings of the new rough sleeping advisory panel that will feed into the Government taskforce on rough sleeping and homelessness, which is meeting next week. The advisory panel, which includes the Finnish Government adviser, Peter Fredriksson, is made up of leading experts in the field, who will share knowledge, expertise and experience to support me in the production of a rough sleeping strategy, which I can confirm, will be reported in July this year.

I look forward to the months of work ahead and with pleasure to the opportunities to update the House.

[Mrs Wheeler]

I therefore commend the estimates in the name of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to be supported in the votes.

4.40 pm

Layla Moran: I thank every single Member who contributed to this excellent debate this afternoon. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) for co-sponsoring it and the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who made some incredibly good points about the sorts of things that we need moving forward. I also mention my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), who gave the geekiest speech of the day. Exactly the point of these estimates day debates is to follow the money. If I have learned anything on the Public Accounts Committee, it is that by following the money, we can get to the heart of the difference between words and action.

I thank the Minister for replying to many of the questions that were asked and for the clarifications that she provided. I found it disappointing, however, that there was still not a clear strategy on how we will build the new social homes that we need for the future. [Interruption.] The report was clear. I am also happy that she will come back to the House to update us in future. Let us keep talking about the money; in the end, in some ways it is the most important thing.

Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).

Department for Transport

[Relevant Documents: Written evidence to the Transport Committee, on the Department for Transport Supplementary Estimates 2017–18, reported to the House and published on 20 February 2018; Oral evidence taken before the Transport Committee on 16 October 2017, on Policy priorities for the Department for Transport, HC 430; Oral evidence taken before the Transport Committee on 22 January 2018, on Rail Electrification, HC 702.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018, for expenditure by the Department for Transport:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £268,829,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 808,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £753,858,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) the sum authorised for issue out of the Consolidated Fund be reduced by £551,337,000.—(Amanda Milling.)

4.42 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I thank Members from on both sides of the House for their support for this debate, including my hon. Friends the Members for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), who so ably gave the presentation on the debate before the Backbench Business Committee, as I was not able to attend. The range of support confirms that the Department for Transport's spending priorities are of national concern across party lines and in every region of the United Kingdom. Whether it is on rail franchising or transport investment, I think that the Department is giving passengers and taxpayers a raw deal.

Given this breadth of interest, I am disappointed that the Transport Secretary has not come to the Chamber to hear this afternoon's debate. I recall that he was also unable to attend our Back-Bench debate on transport in the north on 6 November. I am, however, very pleased to see the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), in the Chamber, and it is also good to see the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), who will respond for the Government. As well as representing the London seat of Orpington, he serves as the Minister for London, and I note in passing that not one Minister in the Department represents a northern seat, and not one represents a seat outside England.

I want to highlight the significant, long-standing problems with how we run our transport services and invest in transport infrastructure. I also want to press the case for a bolder, more ambitious approach to transport spending that leaves no citizen, no nation and, crucially, no region behind, and that will boost economic efficiency and growth post Brexit.

The international evidence paints a stark and disappointing picture. Britain's infrastructure spending is the lowest of any developed country in the OECD. The inequality between our regions, measured according to gross valued added, is the widest in Europe, and our national productivity, as we all know, is low compared with other countries. These problems cannot be solved without better transport investment, and without better north-south and—very importantly—east-west connectivity.

Experts from the Institute for Public Policy Research North to the Centre for Cities, and from the National Infrastructure Commission to the authors of the northern powerhouse independent economic review, are all agreed that we cannot increase productivity and close the gap between our regions unless we dramatically upgrade our transport infrastructure and make up for decades of under-investment. This requires an ambitious investment programme for every corner of the country. In northern England, that means investing in bus services, not cutting them; dramatically reducing rail journey times; increasing rail capacity for passengers and freight; and modernising our rolling stock.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. The north-east received just 2.7% of overall public spending on transport from 2012 to 2017, compared with the 38.3% that London and the south-east received. Does she agree that the north has little chance of fulfilling its true potential if that unacceptable imbalance continues?

Diana Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for that point—I was just about to come to it—and agree absolutely.

If we are serious, such an ambitious investment programme means plugging what IPPR North has calculated to be a £36 billion gap in transport spending between London and the north, and accepting and building on Transport for the North's plans for our region. Those plans would, by 2050, not only create 850,000 jobs, but partly pay for themselves by reducing the north's fiscal deficit by 47% compared with business as usual.

A new approach to running transport services is also required. We need an approach on managing transport that works for fare-paying passengers, not dividend-troughing shareholders. Rail operators that mismanage services and threaten to default on their franchises cannot get away with it. Taxpayers' money and fare revenues should be spent on transport investment, not on bailing out private companies that recklessly over-bid. Regions outside London need statutory, sub-national transport bodies with the same clout and borrowing powers as Transport for London. To be fair, the problems I have just outlined are not all the fault of the Transport Secretary or the Department for Transport, as many relate to the actions of successive Governments of all colours stretching back over many decades. However, the Secretary of State is responsible for what happens on his watch, and we are entitled to hold Ministers to account for the steps they take—or fail to take—to tackle these problems.

I have four questions for the Minister. First, how does he intend to act on auditors' criticism of the effectiveness of a range of transport bodies and projects? The National Audit Office has been scathing about the performance of Highways England's 2015 to 2020 road investment strategy, highlighting the fact that many of the promised road investments are considerably behind schedule. Network Rail's operations have also been subject to long-standing NAO criticism. The NAO has also turned its sights on the Department's role in a range of projects and franchises, not least the Thames garden bridge in October 2016. What will the Government do about these criticisms?

Secondly, in the wake of the east coast debacle, the Government need to answer pressing questions about the state of our rail franchising system. The recent problems with the Stagecoach-Virgin Trains east coast franchise risk undermining the whole franchising process. The situation sends a message to future bidders that they can get their sums wrong and over-bid, but still get a bail-out to the tune of perhaps more than £1 billion. The Secretary of State's subsequent decision to extend Virgin Trains' west coast franchise only reinforces that concern.

Last month, the NAO rightly announced an independent investigation of what had happened. Subsequently, on 5 February, the Transport Secretary came to the House with stern words about Stagecoach, but no concrete assurances that it would not win a future bid. I must say to the Minister that that stands in stark contrast to the swift, decisive action taken by Lord Adonis after National Express threatened to default on the same franchise in 2009.

This debacle also exposes huge problems with the broken franchising system. As has been shown by the answers to parliamentary questions that I have tabled, there have been fewer bids for rail franchises in recent years than was the case at the start of the decade. Since 2012, 13 franchises have been directly awarded without the promised competition.

Thirdly, if the Transport Secretary is so confident about the benefits of his transport upgrade programme and the scrapping of electrification, why will he not spell out the exact benefits it will bring? Last year, when he scrapped all electrification plans—outside the south-east, of course—in favour of bimodal diesel-electric technology, he assured Members in a written ministerial statement that

“we no longer need to electrify every line to achieve the same significant improvements to journeys”.—[*Official Report*, 20 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 71WS.]

So why have Transport Ministers proved unable to answer my very specific written questions about the exact travel speed improvements, ongoing financial costs and emissions that passengers can expect from the new bimodal trains?

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): The Government said recently that they wanted to see the elimination of diesel traction on our railways in a few years. How can they achieve that if they are going to cancel all the electrification schemes?

Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I hope that the Minister will respond to it.

While Ministers have admitted that following the scrapping of electrification the ongoing costs will be higher than they would have been with electric trains, they have refused to say by how much or what that will mean for future ticket prices. Although I have been told that the environmental impact of bimodal trains has been “taken into account”, I am not sure that an environmental assessment has been undertaken. It seems that big decisions are made in the apparent absence of basic information.

It is also astonishing that we still do not know the future of trans-Pennine electrification. No official announcement has been made since the Transport Secretary cast doubt on the project during a media appearance in

[Diana Johnson]

July 2017. I acknowledge that the rolling stock is being upgraded, but the very companies that are supplying it tell me that without improvements to the tracks, they will not be able to get anywhere near their maximum speeds. The developers at Great Western Railway have warned that its bimodal trains will be slower in diesel mode than the ones that they will replace. I hope that the Minister will commit himself this evening to an urgent, independent assessment of the impact of scrapping electrification.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I agree with a great deal of what the hon. Lady is saying, particularly her comments about the appalling east-west journey times in this country, which are a national disgrace, but the fault of generations of Governments who failed to invest. May I urge her to add a fifth question to her list? Community transport is an issue of huge concern, given the proposals on which the Department is consulting. Never mind getting from city to city; what worries many of my constituents is the potential devastation of community transport if those proposals go ahead.

Diana Johnson: I shall be pleased to add that to my list of questions. The hon. Gentleman has been very clear about the subject on which he wants the Minister to respond.

My final point is about the need to tackle regional inequality in transport spending. Analysis produced by the House of Commons Library earlier this month shows that in the five years since 2012, London has received more than twice as much per head as the north. The figures for future projected spending look even worse. According to the latest analysis from IPPR North, London will receive £4,155 per head over the next four years, while Yorkshire and the Humber will receive £844 per head. The Transport Secretary could have responded to those figures with the candid acceptance of a problem going back over many years and by making a commitment to close the regional gap. Instead, he has sought to play down the disparity.

In an article in *The Yorkshire Post* in January, the Transport Secretary criticised IPPR North for including all Transport for London's spending in its analysis, because many London and south-east schemes attract private funding. This is precisely the reason why northern MPs want a statutory body with the same borrowing powers as TfL: to boost private investment for road and rail schemes to go alongside a fairer share of state funding. The creation of Transport for the North, while welcome, will not correct that inequity—or certainly not any time soon. Its focus on 2050 means that many south-east schemes that are more advanced in their planning, such as Crossrail 2 and the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor, will happen many years earlier than Transport for the North's vision. Indeed, as I pointed out to the Minister during the passage of the Space Industry Bill, we are more likely to see commercial space travel than rail electrification to Hull before 2050.

In conclusion, I believe that the Secretary of State has questions to answer about the scathing National Audit Office report into spending by the Department for Transport. I also believe that he has wavered in his response to problems with the east coast franchise and

let Stagecoach and Virgin Trains off the hook. He has scrapped rail electrification plans across the north, the midlands, the south-west and Wales, and failed to back up claims that those cuts will deliver the same benefits as electrification. He has also dismissed concerns about regional inequality in transport investment, even though such investment is vital for our national economic productivity and growth. As a northern MP, I am not asking what this country can do for the north; I am asking what the north can do for this country. It is time that the Transport Secretary and the Department for Transport also asked themselves that question.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for giving the House a perfect example of keeping exactly to time. However, as the House will be aware, a great many people wish to speak this afternoon, so we now need to have a formal time limit of five minutes, which might well have to be reduced.

4.57 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), who has made a clear case for the vital role of transport infrastructure across our country. I want to talk specifically about the great county of Essex and our transport needs today. You will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that Essex contributes more than £38 billion in gross value added to the UK economy, but with investment in transport infrastructure, we have the potential to do so much more.

I want to focus today on strategic rail and strategic road investments. Essex and East Anglia have historically missed out on funding from central Government sources. As a country, we are investing more in the railways since the Victorian era—something we should be proud of—with public and private sector funds making a significant contribution. Investment in the rail network now could put our economy in an even stronger position as we look to future-proof and grow our economy accordingly. Much of the investment in rail infrastructure comes from the public purse, and last year the Government announced their statement of funds available—famously known as SOFA—which totals £47.9 billion for control period 6, which covers from 2019 to 2024. That level of investment is of course welcome, and it is possible only because of this Government's record on sound finances and the strong economy.

Within the Greater Anglia region, Network Rail's route manager is seeking more than £2 billion of that funding for the Anglia route. My hon. Friend the Minister of State will be well aware of the bids that are coming through, and I hope that the Government will look favourably on that particular request. However, that investment would be for renewals and maintenance, and it would not include major strategic enhancements. Because of the changes that the Government are making, major infrastructure schemes are determined through a new process rather than through multi-year strategic control periods.

The great eastern main line needs significant improvements, and I know that the Department is well and truly versed in its needs, because Members of

Parliament from Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk, north Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire came together through the GEML Taskforce to develop a prospectus for rail investment. That prospectus, published in 2014, was supported by the Government, including the former Chancellor, and contained a number of long-term proposals to improve services particularly for our long-suffering commuters, including new trains, which are coming, and, importantly, infrastructure enhancements such as the Witham loops to boost capacity, the Trowse swing bridge, upgrades to Hawley junction, re-signalling south of Colchester, improvements to Liverpool Street station and other schemes that can no longer be kicked into the long grass.

Investing in these schemes will add over £4 billion to our economy, meaning more jobs, more income for families and more revenue for the Exchequer. That is based on a 2014 analysis, and I am sure a more recent review of the figures, given the additional housing supply in that part of Essex and in East Anglia, will project a greater boost.

Passengers who use the GEML pay more in fares each year, and over the next few years they will be subsidising the rest of the rail network by providing the Treasury with a £3.7 billion windfall. We would like to see that money coming back for long-term investments, because it is rail users in the region who are paying for that. They are contributing hugely and want to see the benefits coming back within the region. It is a complete “no-brainer.” The Government and the Chancellor spoke favourably about this at questions today and understand the significance of it all.

I also want to touch on the two roads that impact on Essex: the A12 and the A120, which connects Stansted to Harwich. They are economic corridors, and delays and congestion on them hold business back, costing companies millions of pounds each year. These roads have been earmarked for widening schemes, but they are subject to various processes within the Department for Transport, and I plead with the Minister to ensure we unblock any bottlenecks to those schemes.

As we consider the supply estimates today, I urge the Minister and the Government to ensure that these schemes can progress and are developed for the long-term benefit of the east of England.

5.2 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing this debate on the spending of the Department for Transport, and I welcome this new format for estimates day debates. I will make a few points, and pose a couple of questions about the supplementary estimate, which I hope the Minister will address in his speech.

When we look at the Department's spending and the announcements it makes, it would be easy to think that transport is about large infrastructure projects. Infrastructure is an important enabler, of course, but we must not lose sight of the outcome we want: it is about how people travel from place to place, how they get to work, and how they get to places to learn and study, and for leisure and for family and social life. Access to good transport opportunities enhances our quality of life, and its absence can lead to social exclusion and isolation.

Just two weeks ago, BBC analysis showed that the bus network is shrinking to levels last seen in the 1980s. Rising car use and cuts to public funding are being blamed for a loss of 134 million miles of coverage over the past decade alone, leaving communities with isolated residents unable to access the most basic services, such as getting to a health appointment or making a shopping trip. The Bus Services Act 2017 might help in some places, so what work have Ministers done to understand the effect of that shrinking bus network, and what impact is this having on other Departments, such as the Department of Health and the Department for Work and Pensions, in terms of people's ability to get to jobs, training or education opportunities? What are the Government doing to address those problems?

The second major concern to our constituents is the diabolical state of local roads. I will come on to issues around the strategic road network, but almost every journey starts and ends on local roads. This issue is raised time and again on the doorstep, and not just when I am talking to local residents in Nottingham, as there is a huge backlog across the whole country. The Department provides money to local authorities for local roads, including a pothole fund. It would be helpful if the Minister said something about the steps that the Department takes to ensure the value for money of the investment that it makes in local roads, because the current patch-and-make-good approach does not seem to be sustainable. My hon. Friends on the Front Bench have rightly called on the Government to fix it first. Yes, that would be a start, but I would say, fix it properly.

Scrutiny of the Department is vital. The National Audit Office has done some excellent work in providing an overview of the Department's work and identified several key areas for improvement. The NAO's work on the first road investment strategy found that that the Department developed it before having a complete understanding of whether the 112 road enhancement schemes in the portfolio represented best overall value. As we come on to the second road investment programme, Highways England and the Department need to show that they are doing more to understand the value of the investments they are making and the steps needed to secure the wider economic benefits.

That is probably even more true of the rail investment programme. The work to modernise the great western railway has shown that the Department did not have a secure understanding of the costs of and schedule for electrification. That led to a reprogramming of the investment plans for control period 5. Electrification between Maidenhead and Cardiff is now expected to cost £2.8 billion—a 70% increase against the estimated cost of the programme in 2014. We know what a terrible impact that has had on the rest of the work in CP 5 that has either had to be cancelled or rolled over into CP 6. The Department has many questions to answer on that. What has been learned will have been lost through the cancellation of that work and will potentially have to be relearned all over again.

Many questions arise from these supplementary estimates that need to be answered. I look forward, on the Transport Committee, to asking Ministers those questions and receiving answers.

5.7 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): This debate will, I am sure, unite the House in wanting more transport investment. We are chronically short of capacity of transport of all kinds in our country. That is true in the north as well as the south; in the east as well as the west. Many MPs will make good cases for their own requirements.

I am particularly optimistic about the UK economy once we leave the European Union—above all, because I look forward to spending the £12 billion a year that we currently have to send abroad. Spending that money at home will mean that jobs and activity come from it. That generates more tax revenue but also, above all, takes some of the intense pressures off the public budgets that have been particularly acute since the banking crash and the big cuts made at the end of the previous decade. Those cuts by the outgoing Government were particularly harsh on capital investment in things like transport. We all look forward to these budgets easing a bit and to the extra tax revenue that growth would bring.

But growth also brings the need for more transport investment. We are very conscious of that in my own area of the country, Berkshire. We need investment in road and rail capacity to catch up with all the additional houses, jobs and business investment that there has been over the past 20 years. We particularly need more road capacity, because in the first half of that 20-year period we had practically no road capital or road schemes approved by the then Government. Only now are we beginning to get a bit of the investment that we need to catch up. We will need substantial further investment because the Government look to parts of the country like Berkshire to carry on with very fast rates of growth in housing development and business development, which in turn will require that extra capacity.

Looking first at rail capacity, I urge the Minister to spend what are obviously limited budgets on two particular priorities. The first is digital signalling. We run only about 20 trains an hour on the very good track networks that we already have. We could easily get up to 25—a 25% increase in capacity—with modern digital signalling, and probably go well above that if we developed and improved the technology. We could also put in a few bypass links of track where we need more of those because we run a mixed railway and it would be better to have more places where fast trains could safely overtake slow trains providing a local service. That would deal with a lot of the capacity problem. Producing extra capacity by building new tracks is expensive and causes environmental problems, and people are not keen to have new tracks going past their front windows or back doors. I urge the Minister to concentrate his money on where we can get the quickest and cheapest results, which is through much better control systems and new types of rolling stock with the right ratio between carriage weight and braking capability so that we can run many more trains an hour.

We then come to road capacity. In my local area we particularly welcome the idea that councils are being invited to establish, with the Government, local strategic highway networks. Those council-controlled roads will be part of a wider scheme that allows access to bigger sums of money so that the roads can provide some kind of back-up or alternative to the main national highway network of motorways and trunk roads. My councils are working on that and are keen to be part of the

bidding process, because we need local networks of main A-roads that have more capacity, better junctions, safer junctions and more ability to route cars and vans from place to place so that people can get their children to school, go about their business and carry on their work by using road-based transport to make their day more efficient.

We also need to ensure that the main highway network is well managed by the state, and I hope future smart motorway programmes can be done a bit faster and a bit cheaper. The current programmes are clunky. They are desirable, but it seems to take rather a long time to get the extra lane of a smart motorway into use.

I also hope the Minister and his colleagues will look at sea transport. We have some potentially great ports—they are good ports already—so let us have a free ports scheme for those who would like to promote more industry and development adjacent to the ports. Let us make sure there are better road links into the leading ports, and let us see what we can do about coastal shipping. That could be a good way of relieving some of the intense pressures on the coastal highways, which leave a lot to be desired on many parts of our beautiful coastline.

Please, Minister, we need much more capacity. Let us try to spend the money more wisely, and let us move quickly to a world in which we have more money to spend.

5.12 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to raise two concerns. The first is about the ending of the operating grant for Transport for London, which is already beginning to have a significant impact on upgrades to the network, not least to the Jubilee line, and increases the prospect of the extension of the night tube to the Metropolitan line being much further delayed than originally planned.

Given that last time the Conservatives were fully in charge of transport in London my constituents saw a 60% increase in the cost of commuting into central London, it seems particularly unfair that, just as a Labour Mayor takes over in London, a second whammy should hit funding for Transport for London.

The bulk of my remarks will focus on a much less high profile part of the transport sector that does not see significant funding in the estimates, although it does see some funding. As the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) rightly said when he intervened on my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), who so ably introduced this debate, the community transport sector faces a devastating impact as a result of the Government's proposed changes.

I am lucky enough to chair the Co-operative party, which has long campaigned under its people's bus campaign for an expansion of the not-for-profit or social enterprise bus sector. The Co-op party believes that community transport and commercial bus routes should be able to be designated as community assets and should be subject to the same protections that community assets are afforded by the Localism Act 2011.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) is not alone on the Government Benches in agreeing with those points. I agree that community transport is very important, particularly to people in rural areas.

Gareth Thomas: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's intervention. If the Minister is not willing to listen to me and to Opposition Members who share these deep worries about the impact on community transport, I hope he will listen to the right hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy). I hope the Minister will also pay further attention to the Transport Committee, which did an excellent piece of work on this sector.

Community transport is too often overlooked. It provides vital connections within urban and rural communities. Tens of thousands of people across the UK are reliant on community transport services for some of the most socially necessary journeys that have to be made. Many of the people who use community transport are among the most vulnerable in our communities, so the Government's announcement that they were seeking to change the regulation under which the sector has been operating was met with shock, and it has placed many services under direct threat. Indeed, Enfield Community Transport has closed, partly as a result of the uncertainty arising from the Government's announcement. I hope it is not too late for Ministers to find a way to back off from the drastic changes they are proposing.

What does community transport cover? It covers door-to-door transport, ranging from the relatively informal lift giving by volunteer car drivers to more organised schemes such as a Dial-a-Ride or Dial-a-Bus for people with disabilities and mobility difficulties. It involves community bus services and covers minibus travel for groups of people such as the elderly or others who struggle to get out and about on their own, where they are taken on shopping trips and such like. I understand that just one small group of commercial bus operators, led by one individual, which wants to cherry-pick community transport contracts provided by local authorities and the NHS, and which does not put anything back into the local area, has somehow managed to persuade Ministers that new rules are needed to interpret EU regulations affecting the drivers and licensing of community transport. I urge Ministers to rethink their support for this group of individuals and to reassert the importance of community transport.

Harrow Community Transport serves my constituents and is very worried about whether it will be able to survive if more of its drivers are required to undergo expensive and lengthy training of the sort that commercial bus and coach companies have to provide.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that a letter of clarification was issued in November, which, if it holds true, will solve all the issues caused by Mr Fidler's letter in July? The danger is that there is still a consultation, so who knows where it could end up?

Gareth Thomas: If the November letter is symbolic of a Government wanting to sort out the problems in a positive way to ensure that community transport can survive and prosper, I of course welcome that. My sense is that the Transport Committee was not wholly convinced of that and of whether Ministers had yet got that fully correct. Perhaps the Committee will be able to haul the relevant Minister before it again to seek further clarification on that, or perhaps the Minister here today will be able to provide further reassurance.

Harrow Community Transport has been in operation for more than 40 years in one guise or another, and as a stand-alone charity and social enterprise since 1980. It has a fleet of 14 minibuses and wheelchair-accessible cars, carrying more than 30,000 passengers annually. It employs 12 full-time and part-time drivers, six passenger assistants, and has more than 40 volunteer drivers and a small admin team. It provides a community car service and a wayfarers' club, which helps to provide access to places of interest for those living alone or in sheltered housing. I underline the point that those who run Harrow Community Transport, and have done so with great pride for a long time, remain profoundly disturbed by Ministers' proposals. It is on that, in particular, that I seek clarity from the Minister today.

5.19 pm

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I share the concerns expressed by the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) about the threat to community transport services. When this debate was listed, I was immediately contacted by David Ouvry, the chairman of our redoubted Chilterns Dial-a-Ride, because he is so concerned about the implications. We understand that the move away from permits and towards public service vehicle operator licences and passenger carrying vehicle driver certificates was precipitated by a commercial operator's complaint about some competitive tendering. Nevertheless, if the proposals go ahead, the impact will be severe.

Chilterns Dial-a-Ride has a team of seven part-time paid drivers and 15 volunteer drivers, and the chairman and treasurer are volunteers as well. The staff have received thorough and high-standard training, which is regularly updated, and there are several hundred paid-up user-members. The team runs trips and outings and does some 13,000 to 14,000 passenger journeys a year—well over 1,000 a month. If all its drivers had to pass a PCV test, Chilterns Dial-a-Ride would almost certainly lose all its precious and essential volunteers. The same is likely to apply to most of, if not all, the paid drivers.

Even if we assume that the drivers would accept that they had to be PCV-trained and passed, the costs look astronomical for a small charity of this size. With 22 drivers, apparently 60%—or 13—would pass the first time, at a cost of £28,366, and paying for the remainder to pass the second time would lift the training costs up to a total of £50,704. Costs in excess of £50,000 would absolutely devastate Chilterns Dial-a-Ride, so when the Minister looks into this—I am aware that there is currently a consultation, to which Chilterns Dial-a-Ride has submitted its views—will he think again? Were we to lose such a facility in our community, it would not be the best use of taxpayers' money, and it would certainly not be the best use of the Department's time.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) that we all welcome investment in infrastructure. Of course, for me, it has to be the right type of infrastructure. I could not let a transport debate go by without mentioning my pet project. I looked carefully at the figures, which show that the proposed changes in the supplementary estimate to the current departmental expenditure limit is around £308 million. I gather that the rise in costs is largely attributable to the need to cover an extra £265 million of High Speed 2 VAT costs. That prompts the question: how was that missed? I hope the Minister will be able to

[*Dame Cheryl Gillan*]

let me know what the accounting responsibilities are that mean an extra £265 million of VAT has to be added.

I am concerned about the governance of HS2. The chairman of the project is leaving and the Department is recruiting yet another, and we have another new Minister on the project. After listening to the directors of Carillion this morning, I am not quite sure whether the Department for Transport actually has either the capacity to manage the project—although HS2 Ltd is an arm's length body—or the procurement expertise to avoid facing the problems it is now facing because of the collapse of Carillion. I hope the Department has assessed the financial impact of the loss of Carillion from its contractual position. Is it looking into whether aggressive bidding has occurred on any other projects?

I wish quickly to mention two other things. First, with this inclement weather, I pay tribute to the transport teams that are gritting and keeping our roads going throughout the country, particularly those in Buckinghamshire. I have a plea for extra money: in the past six weeks, Buckinghamshire has reported 3,600 potholes, and I am sure the number is increasing as I stand here. Although the Government have put in an extra £200 million, there is no doubt that many councils, and many Members in the Chamber who represent councils, would welcome further investment. It is all very well to look into road capacity, but we must also consider the conditions of our roads.

Finally, on the Department's priorities, what is it doing about hyperloop technology and, particularly, electric vehicle technology? The Department has to co-operate with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and any cross-departmental work is difficult. Will it please put those new technologies at the top of its list of priorities?

5.24 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for securing this debate through the Backbench Business Committee and providing Members with an opportunity to hold the Government to account on their spending. I am particularly pleased that we are debating the supplementary estimates for the Department for Transport, because I have frequently raised the issue of regional transport disparities in the House, and at the heart of this is the question of funding.

Put simply, the way the Department currently allocates and spends money is deeply unfair. It is unfair because its decisions on where to invest are based on a narrow and ultimately unsatisfactory value-for-money assessment. If the Government target transport spending in areas of high economic development or places where people already use public transport extensively, they are reinforcing inequalities rather than correcting them. Transport spending needs to be used as a tool for unlocking economic potential, and of course investment in public transport is one of the key ways of encouraging people to use it.

Bradford, like towns and cities across the north, is held back by a persistent lack of investment in our transport infrastructure. In recent months we have seen

the cancellation of many rail electrification projects, the postponement of essential motorway upgrades in Yorkshire, and combined authorities forced to reduce bus services owing to continuing budget cuts.

The north as a whole, and Yorkshire in particular, is getting a raw deal. Recent analysis by the Institute for Public Policy Research North has found that the true extent of regional spending disparity is considerably higher than the Government's estimates. Under this analysis, future transport investment in London is 2.6 times higher per person than in the north. London is set to receive over £4,000 per person, compared with just £1,600 per person across the north as a whole. The situation is set to be even worse in Yorkshire, the lowest of all regions according to IPPR North, where the figure is just £844 per person.

The Government's future spending plans therefore fail to address the historical under-investment in northern transport and infrastructure. Addressing the historical underfunding in Yorkshire will require step-by-step increases in per-person levels of funding until they are equal to those in London. The ambition to create a northern powerhouse and rebalance our national economy will remain unmet for as long as the current funding disparities in transport remain in place.

Let me be clear that I have little to no problem with the Government investing in London's transport system; I believe that all regions benefit from a modern and extensive public transport system. What I do have a problem with are the gross inequities between different parts of the country. These inequities have real consequences for my constituents. Bradford, a city of over half a million people, with a young and enterprising population and home to some of the country's best known companies, does not have a through railway station and is not directly on an inter-city network. This means that train journeys between Bradford and Leeds take over 20 minutes and average only 33 mph. Is it any wonder that nearly 75% of the 45,000 journeys between Bradford and Leeds each day are made by car? Bradford's unsatisfactory rail link is a perfect example of the wider problem. For too long, ambitious transport projects in the north have been passed over, while billions have been spent on similar projects down south.

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case about the need for regional rebalancing. Does she agree that the Department for Transport needs to make changes to the transport business case methodology so that it takes account of the wider economic benefits that can flow from investment in transport, rather than just journey time savings for large numbers of existing transport users?

Judith Cummins: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, as always.

The establishment of the first sub-national transport body, Transport for the North, is a welcome step in correcting the regional imbalance, and I am particularly pleased that its strategic plan includes details of the northern powerhouse railway, including a new station in Bradford. In order to make this plan a reality, the Government must ensure that Transport for the North has the powers and, crucially, the money it needs. One way to quickly and effectively start making progress would be to unpick the skewed value-for-money formula

used by the Department for Transport to make investment decisions, and to create a new formula that stops favouring areas with historically high levels of investment.

Bradford and the north face particular challenges and opportunities, and these opportunities require real action by the Government. Above all, they require a real financial commitment from the Government in order to address the historical level of underfunding of transport in the north. This is the only way to unlock the north's economic potential and to put fairness back into our transport system.

5.30 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): May I start by thanking you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for your kindness in allowing me not to wear my jacket while I nurse my broken arm? I must confess that it is a transport-related injury. I tripped and fell while running to catch a tram, which is rather embarrassing given that I chair the all-party parliamentary light rail group.

In the short time available, I will make some general points about the quality of transport debates that we have in this country. I have been involved in transport debates for almost all the time that I have been in this House, either on the Select Committee on Transport or as the Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary. I sometimes find these debates rather depressing because this country is very good at finding reasons not to do something.

The Transport Committee is currently giving scrutiny to the airport national policy statement about whether we should have a third runway at Heathrow. I do not want to prejudge the outcome of our inquiry, but we were presented with a whole series of arguments as to why it should not happen. Had the recommendation been that we should expand Gatwick, different people would have made the same arguments. Time and again the decision on where to build extra airport capacity would be kicked into the long grass.

Just outside my constituency boundary is a lovely little village called Cublington. I mention it because it featured in the Roskill commission, which 50 years ago started its inquiry about the location of extra airport capacity in the south-east, and we are still debating that half a century later. It was the same with HS1. Before it was built, it was going to scar the garden of England. Now that it is up and running, there are few objections. Indeed, people want extra stations on the line. When I researched the HS2 debate, I found out that this House voted against the west coast main line in the 19th century because it deemed that canals would be a perfectly adequate means of intercity transport. As we consider where we are going to invest vast sums of money—both public and private—in order to upgrade our transport network, please let us do so with a vision of what can be done; do not find constant arguments as to why it should not happen.

I turn to rail in particular. Now, there are problems with franchising. I am not going to defend the system in its entirety, as it is one that needs to evolve. But when there is a problem, the answer is not just to criticise the whole system and say that we have to renationalise everything. Those who advocate mass nationalisation might care to read the words of the French Prime Minister talking about state-run SNCF today:

“The dilapidated network, delays, abysmal debt...The situation is...untenable. The French...pay more...for a public service that works less and less well”.

The point is that there are good and bad in all forms of transport. We need to raise our game and think about what works, not get involved in ideological debates.

Similarly, every year we hear this argument that fare increases are the fault of the privatised system, yet there were inflation-busting fare increases year after year under nationalised British Rail. The debate is on the mix between what the farebox provides for revenue and what central taxation provides. There is a legitimate argument both ways, but let us get away from the stale argument every year that it is the fault of the private sector and that nationalisation would be wonderful.

Lilian Greenwood: I do not wish to get into the argument about why franchising is not currently working, but does the hon. Gentleman share my concerns that the supplementary estimates show that receipts are expected to be £248.6 million lower than expected? Although the Treasury is providing an extra £60 million to partially offset that, £188 million of income still needs to be found from existing budgets. Does he share my hope that the Minister will address where that money is going to come from given the shortfall in revenues from franchises?

Iain Stewart: Revenues go up and down; it is very difficult to forward-plan the income from a railway. The Virgin Trains East Coast situation is not a problem of a line losing money or failing on passenger satisfaction. It is making money—just not as much as was forecast. That is one of the reforms of the franchising system that I wish to see.

Look at Network Rail—a public body. It has problems and has mismanaged some projects, Great Western electrification being the prime example. However, let us also praise it when it gets things right. The Reading and Nottingham station upgrades have been a success and many other projects have been delivered on time and on budget. No system is intrinsically bad or good. My point today is that we should raise the quality of the discussion and not get locked into this stale old debate that too often plagues transport discourse in this country.

My final point in the few seconds that remain is please let us put the passenger front and centre of our conversations. Too often, the transport industry works in silos: it looks at what the rail or bus provision is. We have to look at door-to-door transport, embrace new technology and the opportunities that it brings. When we invest in new trains—enormous numbers of new rolling stock will be coming on to the network in the next couple of years—let us make them comfortable. Technologically, they are brilliant but a lot of them are dashed uncomfortable. Let us put the passenger first and raise our game with a proper debate about how we invest in and improve our transport infrastructure.

5.36 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing this debate. If my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and I were of any assistance, it was, as usual, as her obedient servants in this matter. She made a

[*Andy Slaughter*]

compelling case for her own region, but I am delighted that she does not argue that we should rob Peter to pay Paul—take resources from my region, for example.

Rather than use my own words to talk about transport spending in London, I shall quote the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), Transport Minister until last month and not, I suggest, partisan in favour of the Labour London Mayor. He said last October that spend per head was a bad indication when judging the effectiveness of transport spending:

“The calculation for London... doesn’t account for the substantial number of daily commuters and visitors, both domestically and internationally, who will be using and benefitting from the roads and public transport networks but who aren’t London residents... two in every three rail journeys start or end in London and there are eighteen times more passengers arriving into London during a typical morning peak than at Manchester, the busiest northern city. In particular, as the main international gateway into and out of the country, London will be the location for transport investments which look to serve passengers well beyond the local resident population.”

Indeed, there are severe funding problems in London, and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West mentioned the most pressing: the withdrawal of the entirety of the operational grant—£700 million. What other capital city would that be true of? But that is only where it all begins; we now hear that the money raised from vehicle excise duty in London, some £500 million, will also be spent only on roads outside the capital from 2021.

It feels sometimes as though these decisions are spiteful rather than strategic. The current Transport Secretary is perfectly happy to overspend his budget by £300 million—including, as the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) said, £260 million on VAT for HS2. He said that we could not make adjustments to the system of penalty notices in London, which would have raised £80 million within our own resources. He also refused to allow the suburban rail service to be incorporated. That would have been more efficient and was supported by a number of Conservative MPs in the capital.

Gareth Thomas: Does my hon. Friend also think it is regrettable that the Department for Transport has blocked London from accessing the new national clean air fund, given the scale of problems that diesel is causing, particularly in central and outer London?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I do not want to stop the debate, but I am going to have to drop the time limit to four minutes for the next speaker. The way we are going, it will have to go down to three to get everyone in. I am bothered about that, so can Members who have already spoken bear that in mind?

Andy Slaughter: I will just say that I entirely agree with my hon. Friend and will not take any further interventions.

I will give one example of how politics, rather than good sense, is governing the way that London is dealt with. It is a local example, but I think it is a good case in point. I am sure that many Members have visited the Olympia exhibition centre, an excellent Victorian centre that has been going for 100 years, serving the people of

the country, not just London. Until seven years ago, it had a dedicated timetabled tube service. In response to lobbying by Conservative Members to take trains away from that part of the service and put it on to the Wimbledon part of the District line, we lost that service, despite the fact that because of development, up to 8 million visitors will be going there and it is in the most densely populated part of London.

We have to start taking sensible decisions. That is what the Mayor of London is doing. He has frozen tube fares, which were going up too quickly, for four years. He has introduced the hopper fare, which means that people changing from one bus to another do not have to pay extra. That has benefited 140 million journeys so far. He has introduced the night tube, which the previous Mayor failed to. He has reduced strike days by 65%, and he has, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West indicated, done a lot for not just walking and cycling but increasing zero-emissions vehicles and, indeed, the whole green agenda in London. Last year, he also reduced operating costs for Transport for London by £150 million in a single year.

I will briefly turn to more strategic matters. We have some major developments in London. I am a supporter of HS2, notwithstanding the disruption it is causing to my constituency and neighbouring ones, because it is one of those great transport projects that I believe the country needs. I agree, as I quite often do, with the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham that the execution of the project leaves a great deal to be desired.

I declare an interest, because HS2 is bringing a lot of jobs and homes to my constituency, and it is co-ordinating with Crossrail, which is bringing a £42 billion benefit to the UK economy. We need Crossrail. We also need Crossrail 2. I remind anybody who thinks it is a new scheme that it is the Chelsea to Hackney line from the 1970s. Far from building these great infrastructure schemes in a way that is controversial, we delay for years and sometimes decades in doing so.

Finally, one strategic project that I think is a terrible error of judgment is the expansion of Heathrow. We now know that its commercial benefit is half what the Airports Commission said. It is less than Gatwick, and the net present value of it is about zero over the 60 years. Public infrastructure, in terms of road and rail, could cost up to £18 billion. Despite paying a huge dividend to its shareholders, Heathrow is only prepared to put £1 billion of that in.

The expansion will have terrible consequences in terms of noise and air pollution. We must think again about that. I know that the shadow Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), is applying the four tests of the Labour party and doing exactly that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I call Sir Robert Syms. You have four minutes.

5.43 pm

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I would like to support what the Government broadly are doing, which is to try to increase spending in the transport sector.

Transport is one of the few areas where the Government are necessary to get projects built. In the UK, sometimes I wish we were rather more French in getting on with major public sector projects. If we look at the miracle of California, it was built on state funding of highways, universities and armaments, and on that, the private sector miracles around Stanford University and Palo Alto were built. Unless the Government get on and invest in our strategic road network and many other roads, private sector companies and businesses cannot develop.

I grew up very near to the M4, which was built when I was quite young. It has had a major transforming effect on the communities around it. The economic benefits of a sensible road programme are self-evident. As an MP from the south of England who drives on the M25, the M4, the M3 and occasionally other such roads in the south, it is clear to me that the whole of the motorway network is under pressure. At the beginning of the day, nearly all the road junctions have tailbacks on to the motorways, so they require added investment.

The road network represents billions of pounds of historical investment. If we concentrated on dualling, bypasses and dealing with pinch points, the economic value to our country would be very substantial indeed. It just needs a little bit of common sense, and we could get a lot more out of the road network. I am a believer in that, and we need to be doing more if, post-Brexit, we are going to keep the British economy rolling on. There must be a major cost when we have tailbacks off motorway junctions sometimes for 5, 6 or 7 miles, and the Government really need to deal with that.

I am also a believer in the need to invest in some major strategic projects. I agree with the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) that HS2 will make a major difference. If we look at where the investment is going, we find it is at Euston and Old Oak Common, and in building tunnels. It will have a major impact on London, but also on Birmingham. The railway has to go to the north because it will be a major economic boon for the communities that it will go to. We have to invest and have a long-term plan for such projects because they will sustain and underpin the economic prospects of our country.

I must admit that I have a few concerns about expansion of Heathrow, not least because it would require moving the M25 and the M4. The economic consequences of doing that would be very substantial indeed, so we must think very carefully about it. I have always thought, whether in relation to Stansted, Heathrow or Gatwick, that we can add value by improving the rail and public transport links to the airports. On many occasions when I have ambled through the countryside on something called the Stansted Express, I have thought that if it was just a little bit faster, we might get rather more value for the major infrastructure investment at Stansted.

We have major investments already, but we should look at pinch points and at stretching what we have already. To pick up the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), there are certain things we can do with signalling or dualling on the road network that will get much more value out of a network. Public investment is very important, and now that we are getting the deficit down, I am pleased that we can start to think about long-term planning to create success for our economy.

5.47 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing the debate. It is a very timely one for the south-west, as I shall explain in a moment.

It is no secret that I think that transport links in the south-west are underfunded, as addressing that has been one of my main priorities since entering this place last June. It comes on the back of the need for the south-west to stop accepting the poor deal for transport that we have been given for so long. My transport campaigns in the south-west are about giving us a fair deal by reopening Plymouth airport, extending the M5 from Exeter to Plymouth, and funding our train line properly so that it is faster and more resilient in bad weather. As a region, we have been given—and, importantly, we have accepted—a poor deal for far too long.

Across nearly all areas of Government spending in the south-west, the far south-west, which I represent, has received below average spend. My Labour colleagues have talked about the gap in transport funding for some time. Based on the Treasury's "Country and Regional Analysis" publication last year, we in the far south-west receive about £277 per head. In London, the figure is £973 per head, which means that London gets three and a half times what we get in the far south-west. I do not mind London getting another tube line, HS2 being built or a new runway at Heathrow so long as the far south-west gets its fair share—not more, just our fair share—but that is not happening at the moment.

That is why tomorrow is such an important day for the Government: we will see whether they will put their money where their mouth is. On 30 January, south-west Conservative MPs threatened to rebel on a vote against HS2, and the Transport Secretary wrote them a letter to quell their concerns. In it, he said that Dawlish—the part of the train line washed away by the storms in 2014—

"remains our number one national priority".

I simply do not believe that Dawlish is the Government's No. 1 national priority when it comes to rail. Looking at the blank faces around the Chamber, I see that no one else does either. The DfT also promised in its letter, which was sent only to Tory MPs and therefore, sadly, not to me or to my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), that work at Dawlish would begin "quickly". We have heard that before—jam tomorrow.

What we are looking for tomorrow is a full statement and a plan that will adopt the Peninsula Rail Task Force recommendations, and that is lucky because the letter went on to say that

"the DfT will set out our strategy, following the PRTF report, by the end of February."

That is tomorrow, so I invite the Minister to confirm that the DfT will publish a south-west rail strategy tomorrow, that it will adopt the recommendations of the Peninsula Rail Task Force and, importantly, that it will match Labour's pledge of funding £2.5 billion for this rail action, which covers the first 10 years of spending set out by the Peninsula Rail Task Force. Failure to publish that strategy tomorrow will show the south-west that we have been let down yet again by this Government. We need action, words and funding to follow the agreed plan. That needs to be based on what can be delivered, not promises of jam tomorrow and vague promises of upgrades.

[*Luke Pollard*]

The far south-west has had too many promises since David Cameron came to the region in 2014 saying that money was no object in restoring our train line. The orange army did a great job in restoring Dawlish, but the investment has not flowed in since then, which means that our journeys are too slow and the service is not resilient enough. In the bad weather we are having at the moment, there is a risk that CrossCountry rail services will stop at Exeter and not continue to Penzance. That is because CrossCountry services cannot cope with the salt water of the waves washing over them at Dawlish, so they have to be cancelled. No other part of the country would accept that poor deal, and I say to the Minister that the south-west will no longer accept it. I ask him please to publish that strategy tomorrow—let us get on and fix our railway.

5.51 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): I guess that there is at least one thing on which the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (*Luke Pollard*) and I would agree: the need for more investment in the south-west. There is no question about that. However, unlike him, I am absolutely convinced that we will get exactly what the Secretary of State promised. He promised—he put it in writing—that he would give us information on what he will do about Dawlish and that he would set out in full his response to the Peninsula Rail Task Force. I am confident that we will get that.

I also do not agree that Dawlish is not the No. 1 priority. If the hon. Gentleman is as keen as I am for the south-west to stay on the map, he should remember that if the rocks fall at Teignmouth, the whole of the south-west will be cut off. That is not acceptable. It is therefore—why should it not be?—the No. 1 priority for the Department. As we have to wait till tomorrow to hear about that, today I would like to concentrate on the same subject as other hon. Members: community transport.

Clearly we are at the rough end of the EU hearing and Court judgment that have required the Government to interpret sections 19 and 22 permits in a very different way. The reality is, as others have said, that community transport simply cannot sustain itself without revenue from grants, other income and local government contracts, so the flexing of the interpretation that allows committee groups to flourish and continue is crucial. Most will not or cannot afford to revise their procedure to take account of the regulatory progress and, frankly, the trustees are not prepared to take the increasing risk. Can we blame them? After all, they are volunteers. At the end of the day, who will foot the bill? It will be the taxpayer, because the county council—in my case Devon County Council—will have to foot the bill for the extra cost to fill the gap.

The Government's consultation is under way, and that is welcome, but the process needs to involve careful consideration of how to deal with the problem. I have a letter dated 8 February from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (*Jesse Norman*), who is dealing with this, and he sets out that exemptions should of course apply to these community groups. He said that an exemption applied when there was no alternative contractor, if the alternative contractor

confirmed that they did not regard the community group as a competitor, if the activity was occasional, or if the service was free. With respect to my hon. Friend the Minister, that is not really going to work for Devon, as it does not begin to take account of some of our challenges.

Although a fund of £250,000 for licensing is welcome, it does not help us, because the overall bill will be huge, and that would be a small drop in the ocean. That is aside from the risk that would have to be taken on. As for exemptions for short journeys, Devon is one of the largest and most widespread counties in the country, so there is no such thing as a short distance.

We use our community transport for school contracts and a number of social outings, so I need a better answer from the Government for Dawlish Community Transport, Newton Abbott Community Transport, and Volunteering in Health Teignmouth. At the moment, my county council is acting as if the current interpretation under the recent case law is the way we are going to make progress. That means that the risk is being held in the hands of not the county council, but the voluntary groups. These are volunteers in desperate need; there has to be another way of doing this.

5.55 pm

Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): I, like a number of colleagues, will focus on community transport. As a Labour and Co-operative MP, I am particularly keen to talk about the not-for-profit sector.

The Co-operative party believes that community transport and commercial bus routes should be designated community assets that are, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (*Gareth Thomas*) said, subject to the same protections as community assets are afforded under the Localism Act 2011. Tens of thousands of people rely on these services for some of the most socially necessary journeys. The Government's announcement that they seek to change regulations on the community transport sector was a big surprise. As a result, many such services are now under threat, and there will be a reduction in this socially necessary public transport.

Community transport is a very broad term. It includes local road passenger transport services delivered by charities and other not-for-profit organisations, typically where there is no viable commercial market. The core of community transport organisations includes door-to-door transport, informal lift-giving by volunteer car drivers, Dial-a-Ride and Dial-a-Bus, particularly for people with disabilities and mobility difficulties, and groups such as the elderly and others who struggle to get out and about. This transport is required, for example, to take them on shopping trips.

The Community Transport Association estimates that tens of thousands of people, many of whom are the most vulnerable in our communities, access this form of transport. It has outlined why these journeys are such a lifeline for many. Preston Community Transport, which is based in my constituency, is just one such community transport organisation. It claims that there are now

“significant problems as a result of the Department for Transport's proposed changes to permits and licences. The Department has opened a consultation, but many are still very concerned about the assumptions that lie behind it, and by the fact that the Statutory Instrument to implement these changes has already been drafted. If the changes were to go ahead as proposed, the

impact on Preston CT would be damaging. It would mean an almost total loss of volunteer driven transport in Preston and surrounding areas, as well as having a knock-on effect where paid drivers are used. This would damage the entire business model and we have no ability to absorb such an impact.”

Preston Community Transport represents more than 400 not-for-profit groups and organisations. On average, 38 people a day go on a trip that keeps them socially connected. It operates beyond Preston, but is part of an interconnected whole. Some areas support others, so without one piece, even services that are seemingly unconnected to the proposals, such as car schemes in Wyre, could collapse.

Ministers appear to be fixed in their belief that the changes will affect only a small number of community transport organisations and, even then, only those that “act like a bus company”. That is getting close to being disingenuous, as the evidence of likely impacts is there if we look for it. The Transport Committee’s report published in December was clear in recommending that the Government must protect the social value of community transport and that the Department

“must not use a sledgehammer to crack a nut”.

I hope the Minister will take note of community transport organisations and take the relevant action required.

5.59 pm

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Governments are usually driven by events—events that are unpredictable and therefore unpredicted. Events can sometimes seem pivotal but are often momentary, yet they have the capacity to absorb a great deal of Government resources, time and effort. It is important that Governments step back from events and think in themes. A thematic concentration that allows Governments to plan strategically is critically important in the area of transport, in particular.

This Government have a reasonable record, as did their predecessor, on trying to address some of those themes, yet there is more to do. In the longer version of my speech, which for the convenience of the House I will place in the Library, so that people can be edified and informed by it, I set out the detail of those themes. For the sake of the time that we have available, I will highlight them in this way: it seems to me that there are three.

First, what is the purpose of travel? Over recent years, the blithe assumption has been that it is desirable for people to travel more and more. My contention is that this is not necessarily so. People are obliged to travel further to work, school, leisure, shops and so on. I am not sure that that is compatible with their wellbeing, and we need to think creatively about policies across Government which create that kind of obligatory need to travel, rather than to travel by choice.

Secondly, if we are going to invest in infrastructure, of course it is about what we do in terms of plant, but it is also about people. Equipping people with the necessary skills to make infrastructural investment happen, and to make it work, is vital. The Department for Transport has a good record in this respect. Two reports have been produced—one in 2016 and a review in 2017—that chart the number of skilled people that will be necessary to deliver the ambitious plans for road and rail investment, but we need to be mindful, because the pace of change is considerable. The second of those reports states:

“Our work shows that in the coming years in the roads and rail sectors, we will require a trajectory reaching 5,000 to 8,000 apprentices per year.”

That is an enormous step change in the level of skills and we will need to monitor closely whether we can meet such ambitious targets.

Beyond people and purpose, the third theme is pace. Technological change will alter where we travel, how we travel and in what we travel. It is necessary for any strategy to be sufficiently dynamic to take account of that technological change, which will by its nature alter some of our core assumptions. Purpose, people and place: those are the themes that this debate gives us chance to consider in greater detail and at further length as we reflect on this early dialogue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) spoke about the need to be ambitious in transport debates. Let me end with this point. Chesterton said:

“The centre of every man’s existence is a dream.”

Let us dare to dream about what transport can offer, and let us measure the effectiveness of all we do in respect of popular wellbeing. When each feels valued, all feel valued. If we want to build the common good and to use transport to help to do so, we must measure all we do in terms of wellbeing.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I do not really want to make the time limit three minutes, but if Members could just knock a bit off their speeches to help one another, it will get us all there.

6.3 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): I rise to speak about railway costs, the way they have exploded in the past 25 years and what I think now needs to be done. I will speak, by way of example, about the incredible increase in the costs of rail electrification.

The Minister and his departmental officials may have seen the illuminating recent article in the *Rail Professional* journal by Don Heath, a brilliant railway engineer who led and masterminded the electrification from Hitchin to Edinburgh in the late 1980s and early ’90s. In his article, he describes how that was done and achieved so efficiently. It is a fascinating read. He concludes by contrasting the costs of that earlier electrification with present-day electrification costs. It is almost beyond belief that, stripping out inflation, costs are now seven times greater than when the east coast main line was electrified. They have multiplied by seven times in real terms. I urge the Minister and his officials to read Don Heath’s piece. The modern, bloated costs of electrification have led directly to the abandonment of the Great Western scheme to south Wales, Bristol and Oxford, the Kettering to Sheffield electrification, as well as electrification from Manchester to Leeds.

The ballooning cost of railway track work in general is not new. It happened very soon after privatisation and has continued. In my early days in the House, I raised these costs several times with Transport Ministers. I had been informed by sources inside the industry that track maintenance costs had risen fourfold and track renewals fivefold since privatisation. At no time did Ministers say that my figures were wrong, and the

[Kelvin Hopkins]

Secretary of State once said that costs should be reduced by 80%. It was astonishing. A little later, however, Network Rail agreed that track maintenance should be brought in-house. Sadly, the inefficiencies that had developed in the private contracting sector were brought in-house, too, the same methods having been brought in-house together with the same people to manage them. I also pointed out to the then chair of Network Rail that the thick end of track maintenance and thin end of track renewals overlapped and that leaving track renewals outsourced while insourcing track maintenance was illogical. He grimaced but did not challenge my view.

There is now a dwindling resource of expertise in the industry, with a handful of older British Rail-trained engineers often trying to pick up the pieces of mistaken work on the tracks. The loss of skills is a major problem that can be addressed only by rebuilding a dedicated, comprehensive, in-house, permanently employed cadre of skilled railway engineers and operatives. British Rail had that, and it worked. British Rail has been wrongly maligned, when it actually worked “miracles on a pittance”—not my words but those of the rail regulator some 15 years ago. It had the lowest railway costs in Europe, except for Sweden; now our railways are the most expensive in Europe. The answer to the problem is obvious, and I urge Ministers to think on it.

6.6 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I want to focus on the south-west and, of course, North Devon. I say to the Government that we have made good progress on infrastructure investment in that region's transport network, but there is more to do, and I want to focus on a couple of areas where I believe that to be the case. The first—Members will be relieved to hear me mention these four words—is the North Devon link road. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] Absolutely. I could not get 30 seconds into my speech without explaining the vital importance of this link between the motorway and North Devon. Just before Christmas, we handed a bid for £80 million of funding from the local majors fund to the Transport Secretary. I am sure he is thinking of nothing else and will soon give us extremely good news.

We have already had good news. The Minister came to my constituency in the summer and announced a £5 million funding package for improvements between the motorway and Tiverton, but there is much more to do. I very much welcome the announcement of the major road network process, which ring-fences vehicle excise duty for roads that are under local authority funding control but which, in my view, should never have been de-trunked—it happened under a previous Government. The A361 is a case in point. I hope, then, that the major road network fund will benefit the North Devon link road. We look forward to that announcement. The welcome investment in other roads in the south-west—the A30, the A358, which provides a vital link, and the A303 in two places—will provide better transport links to the south-west, which are vital to unlocking the economic potential there.

I move on to the railways. We have a railway line in North Devon linking Exeter with Barnstaple. I welcome the fact that GWR, the train operating company, is undertaking a consultation and is working closely with

the Tarka Rail Association, which I commend for all its work. There is a need to improve journey times for commuters between Exeter and Barnstaple and, in particular, to increase the capacity and quality of some of the carriages on that line. I note that the deadline for the consultation is 4 April. I hope that the Minister will be watching carefully, with a nose for the need for further investment in that line. It really could unlock greater economic potential.

On the greater south-west, reference has already been made to the excellent report by the Peninsula Rail Task Force, which suggested a fairly ambitious scheme of investment in the rail line down to the south-west. I note, as did the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), that we were promised an answer before the end of February. We have 36 hours to wait. I feel sure that the Transport Secretary will give us the good news that we want on the Peninsula Rail Task Force before long.

Let me briefly—in the 36 seconds that I have left—echo what has been said about community transport. I have received representations, and have visited Go North Devon in my constituency. I say gently to the Minister that we need to look at the issue again, because it is of concern to that community transport group.

We speak about the northern powerhouse and the midlands engine. We have not yet got a snappy name in the south-west, but we are like a coiled spring. We are like Zebedee on steroids. We just need to be unlocked with better investment in our transport. I welcome what we have already had, and look forward to more to come.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I was hoping that the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) might shave a little off. If others do not follow his example, I shall be very grateful.

6.10 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I shall raise two points that are close to my heart. I raise the first in my role as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary cycling group. Additional investment in cycling and walking can bring about a win-win: improved health, improved productivity and learning for people who take exercise at the beginning of the day, reduced congestion, reduced travel costs and better air quality. Segregated cycle paths will prevent cyclists from being “doored and flooded” by inconsiderate car occupants who do not look before they open their doors. I urge the Department for Transport to encourage and incentivise investment in cycling, whether it is delivered by Highways England, by local authorities or by developers. There is a good opportunity to include cycling infrastructure in major projects. For instance, a cycle route could be constructed along the route of HS2, and making it part of the design stage would avoid much higher retrofitting costs down the line. Government figures show that investment in cycling infrastructure pays back £5.50 for every pound. I am sure Members will agree that that is money well spent.

Let me now move on to my other favourite subject, Heathrow airport and runway 3. I also co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on Heathrow expansion, to which we are generally opposed. I am grateful to my

friends who represent northern constituencies, because they have made some powerful points with which I absolutely agree. They are severely disadvantaged by the regional disparity in respect of transport infrastructure, and they are right to ask for borrowing powers and increased investment and support from the Department.

Halting any further investment in runway 3 would be part of the solution. The Department itself estimates the likely net economic benefit to the UK to be almost nothing: £0.2 billion to £6.1 billion, over 60 years. That is less net benefit than would be produced by the expansion of Gatwick. There are no proposals to fund the essential road and rail infrastructure that is necessary. Heathrow airport will provide only just over £1 billion, but the Airports Commission says that between £5 billion and £6 billion is needed, and Transport for London has specified £15 billion to £18 billion. There would not be adequate world-class noise insulation for our residents, and there are no funds for the replacement of the fairly recently built waste transfer station. Airlines are unwilling to fund the runway because they are already paying the highest slot costs, I believe, in the world; they are certainly paying, by a long way, the highest airport charges in Britain. Without extensive subsidy, the number of domestic routes served by Heathrow will fall from seven to four. The project cannot be completed and also remain within air quality limits. There is unused capacity at several other London and regional airports. Those are many good reasons why the project should be halted now.

6.14 pm

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Notwithstanding the weather, the House should be basking in the warm glow of success, at least as regards productivity. I am delighted to say that, just at the point when the Office for Budget Responsibility threw in the towel and gave up, we embarked on the first period of sustained improvement in productivity for seven years. Maintaining that is critical, and, as has been agreed on both sides of the House, part of the answer is improvement in our infrastructure.

I am delighted that we have more than £460 billion in the pipeline for infrastructure investments, and over half of that will be coming from the private sector. I sincerely hope that part of it—I beg to differ from the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) here—will be the expansion of Heathrow; we have talked about that enough and we need to get on with it, but I will not go further into the debate on that with the hon. Lady, given the time limit today. I am pleased that since the financial crisis we have, notwithstanding the other pressures, maintained the investment in our infrastructure, which has exceeded in terms of GDP percentage that of France and Germany over the period.

I listened carefully to the proposer of the motion, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), and I agree that this is a national challenge. I went through the details of this, and I warmly welcome the TransPennine route upgrade, think it is a smart move to make smart motorways of the M60, M62 and M6, and, burrowing into the detail, support the £100 million being spent on the Tees Valley A19. What will please the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth is the £14 million being spent on cycle lanes in Gateshead and Newcastle. Those are all examples, both very small and

very large, of the Government acting to ensure we boost our productivity and make this a better place to live across the country.

Above all, the establishment by this Government, with £260 million of funding, of Transport for the North is a good move; it will create proper and good national advocacy through that body. One might wonder why I am saying that as a Member for a Sussex constituency; I do so because it serves the interests of Horsham and the whole of the country if our economy and our growth are broadly based.

I am pleased to represent a constituency in one of the most productive parts of the country, however, and, while we recognise the need to have growth across the country, we must also recognise the need for that most productive part of the economy, London and the south-east, to continue to succeed, and for that engine to keep humming. That, too, is in the national interest.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry) said, when she was rail Minister, that the best way to get the country's productivity going was to make certain that Southern rail worked. She was right then, and it is still true now. We have for too long neglected infrastructure expenditure on our commuter lines in the south-east.

I had two key points to make. One was about digital railways, which has been amply and brilliantly made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), so I do not need to wax lyrical on that in the minute remaining to me. But I must refer again to Southern rail. I welcome the investment going into London Bridge and the Balcombe tunnel, which has been there since 1840 and is used daily by Thameslink. I would welcome that as part of an ongoing programme proposed by the Brighton Mainline Alliance, which I sincerely hope it will force through. We must upgrade Windmill Bridge junction and develop East Croydon station. That alone would lead to £6 billion of improvement to the national economy, if we can get our lines working correctly through the Southern region. I say to the Minister that as part of this we need extra station capacity between Horsham and Crawley; I look forward to renewing my conversations with him in the future. Being able to help other Members is always an aspiration of mine. With that, I conclude my remarks.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The time limit will have to come down to three minutes. I was hoping every speaker could have given 20 or 30 seconds, but unfortunately that did not happen.

6.18 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): As many Members have already suggested, our transport infrastructure plays a critical role in the functioning of our modern society, connecting our communities. I am particularly pleased to speak in this debate having recently taken on the role of chair of the Conservative Back-Bench transport group. We are planning to cover a number of wide-ranging transport topics from future rail connectivity following HS2 to the future of our shipping and ports following Brexit. Of course it would be remiss of me not to use this opportunity to invite the Minister to one of our future meetings.

[Jack Brereton]

Data from the House of Commons Library clearly indicates a continuing increase in spending across all regions in England. Interestingly, my own region of the west midlands has seen transport spending rise from just over £1.2 billion to nearly £2 billion between 2011-12 and 2015-16. Upgrading our rail network so that it is HS2-ready, and ensuring the continuation of the roll-out of the national network of smart motorways, is at the heart of the midlands connect strategy. It is vital that HS2 is fully integrated into our existing conventional rail network, ensuring that the benefits of HS2 are maximised throughout our communities. More needs to be done to ensure that the opportunities of HS2 connectivity are not missed but are fully realised, so that places like Stoke-on-Trent are fully connected through direct classic compatible services on the HS2 network. Stoke-on-Trent must be connected as an HS2 city that succeeds in fully exposing the potential for innovation, creativity and development. The construction of phase 2a is likely to have a significant impact on the existing highway and rail network. Specifically, there is likely to be significant congestion at junction 15 of the M6. I encourage Ministers to look into this further.

As regards the work that is being done to improve our east-west connectivity, which a number of right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned, North Staffordshire's Crewe-Derby line is essential if we are to see the upgrades to rail services in my constituency to Longton and through the city. There has been a 60% increase in footfall at those stations since privatisation, and that will increase as we move towards the economic potential that needs to be unlocked in Stoke-on-Trent.

I am very pleased that the Government are focusing on this reinvestment in our national transport infrastructure and creating the networks that will serve and champion economic growth. However, we need to continue to focus on how we can make the most of these opportunities for major investment so that that investment generates the greatest potential to deliver on housing and jobs growth in our constituencies.

6.20 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on transport. I am a member of the Transport Committee and I have a great passion for the subject. It took me over four hours to battle through the snow in East Sussex to be able to speak for three minutes in this place. Who says that this place is not maddening?

Transport is hugely important for my region. It has the ability to be an absolute game changer. Of course, any hon. Member can say the same thing about their constituency. We have heard lots of talk about the lack of subsidy in the north, for example. It is incredibly interesting that the average amount of subsidy spent per passenger kilometre in Great Britain is 5.1p, whereas in northern areas it is almost 25p. In the area I represent, where we have Southern railways, the worst performing rail operator in the country, the figure is only 1.1p. I dare say that there is a correlation between those two things. Hon. Members in the north who talk about their lack of investment may wish to look at the service that we suffer in my constituency. It clearly does not work, and I would like a lot more to be done. We should bear

in mind the fact that the nearest town to my constituency border is Hastings—the most deprived town in the south-east. We need a better, high-speed rail link to Ashford and St Pancras that will open up huge opportunities.

I also want to talk about roads in my constituency. I happen to have the embarrassment of a road on which people are more likely to suffer a fatality than any other road in the UK. I also have two roads that are in the top 10 of the most dangerous roads. And those roads remain dangerous. Highways England modelled the A21 on a road in Scotland where 80% safety improvements had been made by using average speed cameras, but then decided not to proceed with that on the basis that it had a better alternative. Eighteen months later, we are still waiting for that alternative. This is clearly not good enough.

Another instance is the A259—again, one of the most dangerous roads in the country, where residents face a maddening situation: they are seeing more planning applications in their locality, and despite their paying the council tax to help build a road that thousands of houses should go alongside, the developer is not building out those homes. That developer should be charged full council tax after 12 months of sitting tight, because those residents will get even more air pollution from the traffic on their roads and then watch an empty site not being built out where the housing should be put. For me, it is all about joining things together.

I advise everybody in this place to read the Transport Committee's report on community transport, with reference to the 9 November clarification. The regulations that were talked about in this House have now been clarified and will not take place following the concerns expressed. I know that there has been a good lobbying effort. People need to read that report.

6.23 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): In the three minutes available to me, I would like to make three brief points.

The first point is about community transport. I emphasise what other hon. Members have said about this already. I have two shining examples in my constituency: West Oxfordshire Community Transport and Our Bus Bartons, which do a wonderful job in connecting our rural constituencies, enabling people to get to work and ensuring that elderly people are not isolated but can get to doctors' surgeries, for example. The Community Transport Association and others have made me very aware of the potential ramifications of sections 19 and 22 of the Transport Act 1985 if there were changes. At present, there seems to be no safety ramification requiring those drivers to have public service vehicle licences. I simply ask that the Minister and the Department do everything possible to ensure that community transport is able to function in exactly the same way as it does now and continues to provide that vital link, particularly in rural constituencies such as mine.

My second point is about the A40. Other hon. Members pass through it, and I am grateful for the support of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), whose constituency is affected just as much as mine. There are no two ways about it: my constituents spend hours a week stuck in congestion on the A40, which has untold economic consequences. West Oxfordshire and

other areas affected by the A40—the Members for many of those areas are here for this debate—will never reach their full economic potential until that road is addressed.

The A40 could be addressed in a number of ways, but one thing is certain: a final fix must be found, not just for economic reasons but for the quality of life of my constituents and others who spend hours stuck in maddening congestion along that road. Part of the solution is, of course, rail transport. There are two important stations in my constituency, Hanborough and Charlbury, and many small ones—Kingham, Finstock and Ascott-under-Wychwood to name a few. Those stations are all terribly important to the rural areas they serve, and making the most of them is critical to taking some of the traffic off the A40 by ensuring that people can get where they need to be for work or for personal reasons.

Finally, there are a number of solutions. We need to look at the signalling aspects so we can have fast trains—bimodal transport has been looked at, too. We also need to consider how we can make the most of what we already have, such as by tying in public transport to Hanborough station. Perhaps the Cowley branch line could be reopened to passenger services—a shuttle from Hanborough to Oxford would do a great deal to take traffic off the roads.

That was a quick canter, and I am grateful for those three minutes. The Government must take action in all these budgets.

6.27 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) for having the foresight to set up the new stations fund when she was Secretary of State for Transport. Some £6.6 million from that fund has contributed to the £9.9 million new station in Ilkeston, which opened just 11 months ago this coming weekend. The station has exceeded all expectations. Some 30,000 passengers used the station in its first three months, twice the number expected, and it has improved connectivity, attracted more businesses into Ilkeston and provided opportunities for my constituents to go to Nottingham, Chesterfield and Sheffield for jobs.

The station has also brought the community together, with the local school taking on and looking after the planting and gardening at the station. Two Santa steam train specials visited the station, which brought out all the people to welcome them to the station. Public money has a huge impact on our local communities when it is spent right.

My Long Eaton residents are going through the pain of having a smart motorway installed between junctions 23 and 25 of the M1 as part of the 30 new smart motorway schemes under the £15 billion investment plan. I have been reassured by Highways England that the scheme will help to relieve the pressure on junction 25, which is hopefully why my Long Eaton residents are putting up with it.

East Midlands Council and D2N2 feel that tinkering around the edges on the A52 will solve the pressure at junction 25, but we need to be bolder. That is why I once again ask the Secretary of State to be bold and brave and get a new junction between junctions 25 and 26, which would help to alleviate the problems of

extra traffic caused by HS2 and the 2,000-plus houses we want to develop on the largest brownfield site in the UK.

While we are on the subject of HS2, it would be remiss of me not to mention and make a huge plea, yet again, for more appropriate and timely compensation for my residents who are grossly affected by phase 2b.

In my last few seconds, I give a plug to Erewash community transport. Only yesterday I witnessed how useful it was in helping to get disabled people and their volunteers from Leonard Cheshire Disability to the Ilkeston bowling alley, making sure those disabled people are fully integrated with the community. The social impact of community transport is so important. I am sure the Minister has heard that message loud and clear, and I am sure we will get an answer.

6.30 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I want to say a few words about the urgent need to support community transport providers. Those fantastic organisations do vital work to reduce loneliness and isolation, yet through no fault of their own they are fearful for the future. Community Connexions in my constituency is a charity with more than 30 years' experience, and it provides a community transport service throughout Gloucestershire and beyond. It does so with the help of more than 50 local volunteers using accessible minibuses and their own vehicles. These are public-spirited individuals motivated by nothing more than a desire to give back to society. The impact the organisation is making is remarkable. For example, in 2016, more than 5,000 passengers were taken to health appointments and more than 13,000 passenger trips were taken to day centres. That was all done with care and compassion, with volunteers in some cases going literally the extra mile. By operating a number of community routes, it is doing work that the private sector is not interested in running. To give one example, it plugs a gap left by the market in the route from Cheltenham to the butterfly garden, a project providing education, therapy and recreation for people with disabilities.

I am of course aware that the Department for Transport is facing a legal challenge arising from the direct effect of EU regulations; it seems that the Bus and Coach Association is hell-bent on taking the maximum advantage through legal pressure and insists that there should be a level playing field, and what is not to like about a level playing field? But there is an important distinction here: community providers are not-for-profit, so any surplus they manage to gain through a contract is used to extend the reach of charitable community transport and therefore the scope for doing more good. So it is of course right that the Government respond to this legal challenge, but I hope they will do so in a way that is proportionate and does not fatally undermine the ability of community transport providers to continue as a going concern. I invite the Government to scrutinise with some care the suggestion that somehow community providers operate to a lower safety standard. I respectfully suggest that the evidence is not made out on that.

In short, I urge the Government: first, to move promptly to end the paralysis and uncertainty that is afflicting the community transport sector; secondly, to act generously on funding to assist community transport providers in

[Alex Chalk]

obtaining further permits for licences or additional training, as required; and, thirdly, to keep firmly in mind when addressing this the enormous social dividend and return to society that results from the work these organisations do. The Government must recognise that losing community transport providers would be a tragedy for some of the most deprived in our society.

6.32 pm

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): Until a few months ago, I was a London Assembly member and I was always pleased to see the incredible amount of investment being committed by the Government to London. Anyone living in or visiting the city over the past eight years cannot help but have noticed the significant continuous improvement in transport infrastructure. However, I have been an Essex MP for eight months and I am somewhat less pleased when I compare the London numbers with those for my eastern region. Last year, in the east of England, just £74 million was spent on local public transport; my region received just 3.8% of the UK's budget for such services over a five-year period.

I do think the Government have the correct approach to fiscal management, but I do not wish to see the community services adversely affected, especially those that make no demands on the Exchequer. It may therefore not surprise Members to know that I am one of the MPs who is speaking today on community transport. Uttlesford Community Travel currently runs under the section 19 and 22 permits set out within the Transport Act 1985. However, it is at risk of being priced out of the wonderful work it does in the area because of the high cost of training qualifications being mandated, so I am asking the Department to protect community travel services and their volunteers. Other Members of this House, including the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), have spoken about the great work these groups do in our constituencies, and not least among them is Uttlesford Community Travel, in my constituency, which is run by Ian Shaw and Malcolm Barrell. I am here representing them.

Some time ago, I raised this matter in person with the Secretary of State, who was sympathetic. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) referred earlier to a Government letter of clarification, which hopefully will address the issue. I remain optimistic and hope that an exemption will be found for Uttlesford Community Travel and so many other charity transport providers throughout the country, so that they can continue to help to improve so many people's quality of life.

6.34 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak in this new world of estimates debates, which means that instead of debating obscure reports we can talk about numbers and principles. The reality is, though, that many estimates are still going to be rolled up and voted on without debate. We are a long way from full transparency.

There are some increases in the supplementary estimates, and they are all reactive increases. There is £265 million to cover the HS2 VAT risk—just like that—yet the £35 million to scrap VAT for Scottish police and fire

services was supposedly a Budget set-piece announcement for Scotland. Only last week, the UK Government voted down a review of the £140 million of backdated VAT that we want to be refunded to emergency services in Scotland. Will the Minister explain how that £265 million of VAT can be found so easily for HS2?

Some £5.6 million is allocated in the supplementary estimates for Brexit costs. That is going to be a drop in the ocean of what will be required. There need to be clear funding allocations as part of the Brexit preparations and there should be transparency about what that funding is for, especially if it is used in preparation for a no deal.

In my time in this House, the focus of much of the general transport debates has been on the whole north-south divide and whether London has much greater access to funding than other regions and nations in the UK. The bare figures back up the latter assertion: London and the south-east have between them shared more than 38% of the total spend over a five-year period. Such continual disproportionate spending creates either a vicious circle or a circle of prosperity, depending on how it is considered. Many of London's transport projects have been used to drive the regeneration of areas, which brings further investment and jobs and thereby effectively sucks in more investment that could have been targeted elsewhere.

Even HS2 confirms the London-centric approach of successive Governments. There was no way that the UK Government was going to countenance starting in the north first or even, at the very least, undertaking north and south linkages at the same time. I certainly sympathise in particular with the north-east of England, which seems to suffer disproportionately. It also means that there will be some form of detriment to cross-border journeys.

Let us consider the Scottish total spend on transport over the past five years. At 13% of total UK spend, we are spending a higher amount per capita than the rest of the UK. On national road spending, Scotland is punching well above its weight. However, that is not because of the benevolence of the UK Government; it is despite the UK Government and thanks to the will of the Scottish Government.

Devolution has made a huge difference to the amount that can be spent on trying to alleviate the north-south divide. We need only consider the work that has happened since the Scottish Parliament came into being. Before that, we were completely at the mercy of the UK Government and suffered as a consequence. That alone is confirmation that power needs to be moved further from London.

In 2009, the Scottish Government completed the upgrade of what was the last remaining single-track trunk road in the UK: the road to the isles from Fort William to Mallaig. It is truly astonishing that that was overlooked for so long. Things are the same on many of the Scottish islands, where there are single-track roads with passing places, interspersed with upgraded stretches that have been partly funded by the EU. That brings us back to the question of what the UK Government are going to do to plug the EU funding stream. What are they going to do when access to European Investment Bank loans dries up?

It took until 2017 for there to be a continuous motorway between Glasgow and Edinburgh. The Scottish National party Government have funded and completed the M74

and M80 upgrades, and we are progressing with the A9 and A96 dualling programmes. The fact that so much work has been done illustrates the historical shortfall. Some Opposition parties in the Scottish Parliament are crying out for more work to be done, but it is really difficult, especially as the estimates process is year on year. Barnett consequentials might or might not arise out of a given Budget—conversely, a cut could be imposed on the Scottish budget—so it is clear that the estimates process is still not fit for purpose. It is certainly not conducive to long-term strategic planning.

At no point in the budgetary process are the Scottish Government asked what their needs are so that decisions can be made on that basis. Yet we all know that the extra money secured by the Democratic Unionist party was apparently not a sop to the DUP; it was just that the UK Government were doing a needs-based analysis for Northern Ireland and suddenly discovered that it needed another £1 billion. Hopefully the other nations and regions of the UK will now be given the same forethought in the estimates process.

When it comes to rail funding, there is a process that should allow longer term planning and investment: the control period cycles. Previously, Scotland was allowed to access up to 11.2% of Network Rail's borrowing capacity, based on the relative size of Scotland's network within the UK network. Since then Scotland has actually built more railway lines, thanks to the SNP Government, but our allocation of funding has been proportionately cut. That does not make sense. Even worse, the UK regulator, the Office of Rail Regulation, has stated that Scotland needs £4.2 billion for essential repairs in order to meet future demand. However, without any warning the UK Government have allocated only £3.6 billion, leaving a £600 million shortfall. What is the point of involving the ORR in a proper, scientific estimates process if it is just ignored by the UK Treasury? I am yet to hear any Transport Minister stand up to defend the ORR and demand that extra money for Scotland.

It is impossible not to mention the rail franchising debacle. I have stated that the estimates process is not fit for purpose, and the same certainly goes for rail franchising. We had the west coast main line tender debacle, which led to the direct award to Virgin. We had the Southern rail shambles and too many direct awards in general. The Transport Secretary's failure to get a grip of the Southern rail situation has cost the taxpayer £240 million in lost revenue, and that is a small drop in the ocean compared with the situation with Virgin Trains East Coast. The Secretary of State needs to get a grip of the east coast main line and return it to public ownership.

In conclusion, this is supposed to be a more transparent system that allows greater debate, but it seems to me that there is a long way to go. There is a long way to go before we have proper long-term planning; a long way to go before there is equitable spending, and not a bias in favour of London and the south-east; a long way to go before we have a Secretary of State who understands that private franchises do not generate magic money that the Government could not otherwise access; and a long way to go before we know the implications of Brexit. With the UK Government determined to hide the Brexit sectoral impact analyses, I am also concerned that the estimates process will continue to be a guesstimates process and that there will be a complete lack of transparency.

6.42 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for opening the debate. She made an excellent point about how central transport spending is to productivity and the wider economy—purpose, people and place, as we heard from the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes).

It is right to say that 2017-18 has raised many questions about the governance of public resources. Questions asked in numerous National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee reports have highlighted the Government's failed stewardship of our transport system, as has also been highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins). While passengers have paid and paid again into the leaky finance pot, the failed leadership has ricocheted across industry, which has had to respond to frequent announcement of U-turns by turning on and off skills, on and off orders, changes to specs, cancellations and delays.

The Government have made a complete mockery of control periods on the railways and road investment strategies on the roads—processes that were designed to bring certainty have, in the hands of this Government, turned into chaos, and at a price. Only last week the Public Accounts Committee highlighted the numerous mistakes by the Department for Transport in its management of the Thameslink renewal programme. The Committee's report was littered with examples of "careless mistakes". Poor planning is systemic, and that is something I will return to.

Paragraph 2.12 of the "Memorandum on the Supplementary Estimate 2017-18" states that there was an increase of £65.7 million in the cost of the intercity express programme, attributed to "depot costs and contract variations." That is bound to happen when the Government cannot decide what trains they want to run and keep cancelling rail infrastructure upgrades. Can the Minister tell us what impact these contract variations on the intercity express programme had on the east coast rail franchise? When were they due to come on line? What were the obligations promised under the franchise to the train operator? How were they communicated to Network Rail? We need answers. A parliamentary question on 20 February revealed that two variations in the IEP contract have taken place since 2012, with the last in June 2015. Why has it taken nearly three years for the costs of the variation to be included in the departmental budget?

This Government never fail to tell us how well the rail franchising system is working, but point 2.27 on page 15 of the memorandum states that the passenger rail income for this year is £248.6 million less than expected due to a decline in revenues received from train franchises including Thameslink, Southern and Greater Anglia. What is more, Her Majesty's Treasury will pay an additional £60 million to cover the shortfall. It is yet another magic money tree—just wait until those leaves fall on the line, or should I say in the pockets of shareholders?

The Government caused the problems on Southern rail by refusing to take responsibility for the specifications included in its contract, leaving the hapless Govia Thameslink Railway to do the dirty work. Its approach

[*Rachael Maskell*]

to industrial relations has caused misery to millions of passengers and staff—staff rightly making the case for the safety of passengers. I say “rightly” because the number of assaults on our trains is rising. This fall in revenues follows the Government’s multi-billion pound bail-out of Virgin-Stagecoach on the east coast and a sweetheart deal for the same companies on the west coast. We want the Government to come clean as to how much this will show up on the balance sheet. The public have a right to know.

Since 2012, the Department has granted 13 direct awards because it does not have the resources to rebrand or the courage to take the contracts into public ownership. Why should the public continue to bail out a broken franchising system? Again, the public deserve to know.

Page 20 of the memorandum tells us that Network Rail paid train companies compensation to the tune of £339.4 million in control period 4. This is a disgraceful leakage of money from the rail system that could be used to fund infrastructure upgrades. This leakage is seen in the cuts to the electrification programme and rail upgrades announced by the Department last summer. My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) has highlighted that the Department has wasted £50 million on the midland main line planning. People, including my constituents in York Central, want answers as to where the money is going.

We have heard from Members right across the House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), about the inequality of spending. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) called for investment in railways across the country. I look forward to the Minister’s statement tomorrow as the strategy on the peninsula rail taskforce is published.

This completely broken franchising system is managed by Whitehall’s third highest paid civil servant. However, since his appointment we have seen direct awards, franchise failures and a system in disarray. I note the £308 million of supplementary expenditure outlined in the memorandum, with no loci or accompanying strategy.

Turning to roads, we have also had the debacle of the untaxed road vehicles. The new system was promised to bring in £10 million a year. In fact, £107 million a year is being lost. It is a complete scandal, and incompetent stewardship has brought us to this point. I should mention road investment strategy 1. We have seen projects cancelled, 22 projects delayed and 19 enhancements pushed into the next control period—road investment strategy 2. We want to know what the Government are doing. Are they re-profiling RIS 2? Are they providing wider support for some of those Carillion contracts? As we have heard from the Treasury, £150 million has been put aside. Will the DfT be liable to pay out some of that? Time and again, the public are bailing out private failure.

I also want to mention the cancellation of the £250 million lorry park near Folkestone to ease Operation Stack congestion on the M20. It was cancelled because an environmental impact assessment was not done. That is more than just a careless mistake: it is a costly one, as the Government drive us off the white cliffs with their Brexit strategy.

Bus journeys have decreased by 1.7% and funding has been cut by 33% since 2010, and by nearly £30 million in just the last year. Meanwhile, fares have risen 13% above inflation since the Conservatives came to office. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) highlighted the impact of that and I thank her for her work on the Transport Committee.

Then there is community transport. Most Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and for Preston (Sir Mark Hendrick), mentioned the licensing consultation, and I trust that the Government will take heed. My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) talked about the need for a modal shift on to active travel.

Finally, I must mention the millennial railcard: kept a secret from those who had to pay for it, and now the train operating companies are on strike. How much will the Department have to fork out to honour this announcement? Such poor stewardship of our constituents’ money—money just pouring into private profit at the expense of taxpayers! That is why the public support Labour’s plans for a publicly owned railway, buses under councils’ control and a plan to serve them, their communities and our country.

6.51 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): This wide-ranging debate has covered everything from digital signalling to road maintenance, and from HS2 and Crossrail, all the way to community transport. I shall try to cover as many points and answer as many questions that have been put to the Government as I can. I shall write to hon. Members if I am unable to deal with their points.

We have heard today about why transport matters, how it binds our economy together, and the jobs and opportunity that it brings to every part of the country. That is why it has been such a priority for the Government over the past eight years. The challenge that we face as a country is considerable. We need to build capacity to meet ever-rising demand for mobility; to tackle congestion on our roads and overcrowding on our railways; to clean up transport and reduce harmful emissions; and to devolve power away from Westminster so that cities and regions play a greater role in managing their own transport services.

In opening the debate, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) spoke to the importance of public transport for the sustainability and independence of communities. She specifically mentioned our bus system, which is obviously a concern to Members on both sides of the House. Public-spirited, caring and compassionate community transport operators, which were hailed by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), are crucial in this respect, as they providing a vital service. The point had cross-party recognition—from the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), my right hon. Friends the Members for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) and for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan), and my hon. Friends the Members for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) for Witney (Robert Courts) and for Erewash (Maggie Throup).

We do recognise concerns that some community transport operators that use permits are competing with commercial operators. We need to make changes

to the permit guidance system to ensure that we comply with EU regulation and, where appropriate, that there is a level playing field between small commercial bus companies and permit holders. The Government have no plans to end the current permit system but, as hon. Members know, we are consulting to clarify which operators will require professional licences. We recognise that community transport provides a vital service in all areas of the country, particularly remote ones, which is why the Government have just announced £250,000 to assist drivers with public service vehicle licensing costs.

When we formed the coalition in 2010, the UK was one of the lowest spenders on infrastructure in the OECD. We had decades of under-investment in transport. We were making do with ageing assets, and we had a history as a country of cancelling important transport projects because of legal or planning objections.

One of the first decisions we faced as a Government was whether or not to cancel Crossrail, which we were being recommended to do by officials in the Department for Transport. That was because the economy then was in crisis and the new line would have required significant investment, but we saw it differently as a Government. We recognised that the Department for Transport has a fundamental role to play in the UK's economic recovery, not just by channelling record investment into the network and improving public transport, but by building for the longer term, with the can-do approach recommended by my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart).

We have embarked on the biggest rail programme since the Victorian era and the biggest road investment strategy for a generation. We have rebuilt Manchester Piccadilly, King's Cross, Birmingham New Street and Reading stations. We are in the process of building HS2. We are supporting a new runway at Heathrow, and we are about to open the Elizabeth line.

Those are just the headline schemes. Crucial work is going on all over the country. The hon. Members for Kingston upon Hull North and for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) highlighted the need to correct, not reinforce, regional disparities in funding. This important debate needs to be informed by accurate figures, which is why I want to correct some of the misapprehensions about spending in the north and in the south.

Our analysis as a Government shows that over the four years to 2020-21, central Government's transport infrastructure spending per head will be almost equal between the north and the south of the country, with the north in fact about £10 per head above the south. To get an idea of the scale of our investment in the north, we are investing more than £13 billion over this Parliament to improve northern transport. Up to 2020, every single train in the north of England is being replaced or refurbished.

Every part of the country will benefit from our investment programme, and I wish that I had time to dwell on other areas that are going to see benefits. My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) spoke powerfully about the need for further investment in infrastructure in Essex. She is doing great work with her Anglian taskforce, and we are considering her proposals very carefully.

I want to pay particular attention to the far south-west, which had powerful advocates in the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and

my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris). The Secretary of State will not disappoint them tomorrow when he fulfils his commitment to respond to the Peninsula Rail Task Force with further details of the Government's plans for Dawlish. I also want to tell my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) that we have received his bid for work on the north Devon link road and are giving it all the attention it deserves.

We are investing across the country. We are creating a major road network, funded by vehicle excise duty. We are allowing local authorities to improve or replace the most important A roads in their areas, and to tackle bottlenecks, reduce congestion and connect new housing right around the country. This Government are committed to transport infrastructure as no Government have ever been, and I commend the estimates to the House.

6.58 pm

Diana Johnson: May I first thank everybody who has contributed to this very good debate? I would particularly like to thank the Front Benchers. I hope that we will see action on regional inequalities, because I dispute the figures that the Minister cited. It is absolutely right that we see action on community transport. Given the inclement weather, I hope we will all tonight thank the people who work in our transport services to get us home safely.

Mr Speaker: On account of the fact that we do not take this Question immediately, and by virtue of the commendable succinctness of the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), the House will recognise that we cannot immediately—that is to say now; to wit, at once—proceed to the next business. In fact, if I am candid about it, it is a consequence both of the succinctness of the hon. Lady and, as the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) helpfully reminds me through her gesticulation from a sedentary position, by virtue of the succinctness also of the Minister of State that we are in the position in which we find ourselves. I thought it might be helpful to the House to explain that matter.

Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).

7 pm

The Speaker put the deferred Questions (Standing Order No. 54).

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES 2017-18

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018, for expenditure by the Ministry of Defence:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £8,852,638,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 808,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £1,363,500,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £1,703,385,000, be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

DEPARTMENT FOR EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018, for expenditure by the Department for Exiting the European Union:

(1) the resources authorised for use for current purposes be reduced by £22,093,000 as set out in HC 808,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £650,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) the sum authorised for issue out of the Consolidated Fund be reduced by £24,303,000.

MINISTRY OF HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL
GOVERNMENT

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018, for expenditure by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £296,942,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 808,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £484,352,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £1,618,448,000, be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

DEPARTMENT FOR TRANSPORT

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018, for expenditure by the Department for Transport:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £268,829,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 808,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £753,858,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) the sum authorised for issue out of the Consolidated Fund be reduced by £551,337,000.

The Speaker then put the Questions on the outstanding Estimates (Standing Order No. 55).

ESTIMATES 2018-19 (NAVY) VOTE A

Resolved,

That, during the year ending with 31 March 2019, a number not exceeding 35,470 all ranks be maintained for Naval and Marine Service and that numbers in the Reserve Naval and Marines Forces be authorised for the purposes of Parts 1, 3, 4, and 5 of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 up to the maximum numbers set out in Votes A 2018-19, HC 730.—(*Paul Maynard.*)

ESTIMATES 2018-19 (ARMY) VOTE A

Resolved,

That, during the year ending with 31 March 2019, a number not exceeding 107,630 all ranks be maintained for Army Service and that numbers in the Reserve Land Forces be authorised for the purposes of Parts 1, 3, 4 and 5 of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 up to the maximum numbers set out in Votes A 2018-19, HC 730.—(*Paul Maynard.*)

ESTIMATES 2018-19 (AIR) VOTE A

Resolved,

That, during the year ending with 31 March 2019, a number not exceeding 35,290 all ranks be maintained for Air Force Service and that numbers in the Reserve Air Forces be authorised for the purposes of Parts 1, 3, 4 and 5 of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 up to the maximum numbers set out in Votes A 2018-19, HC 730.—(*Paul Maynard.*)

EXCESSES, 2016-17

[*Relevant Document: Nineteenth Report of the Committee of Public Accounts, Excess Votes 2016-17, HC 806.*]

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2017—

(1) resources, not exceeding £65,506,000, be authorised to make good excesses for use for current purposes as set out in Statement of Excesses 2016–17, HC 810, and

(2) resources, not exceeding £55,000, be authorised to make good excesses for use for capital purposes as set out in Statement of Excesses 2016–17, HC 810.—(*Paul Maynard.*)

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES 2017-18

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £146,208,006,000, be authorised for use for current purposes, in accordance with HC 786, HC 788, HC 796 and HC 808,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £12,431,023,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes, in accordance with HC 786, HC 788, HC 796 and HC 808, and

(3) the sums authorised for issue out of the Consolidated Fund be reduced by £7,361,664,000, in accordance with HC 786, HC 788, and HC 808.—(*Paul Maynard.*)

VOTE ON ACCOUNT 2018-19

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2019:

(1) resources, not exceeding £235,886,869,000, be authorised, on account, for use for current purposes as set out in HC 773, HC 789, HC 797, HC 804, HC 809, and HC 811,

(2) resources, not exceeding £37,276,930,000, be authorised, on account, for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a sum, not exceeding £227,251,036,000, be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(*Paul Maynard.*)

Ordered, That a Bill be brought in upon the foregoing Resolutions relating to Supplementary Estimates 2017-2018, Excesses 2016-2017, and Vote on Account 2018-2019;

That the Chairman of Ways and Means, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Elizabeth Truss, Mel Stride, Robert Jenrick and John Glen bring in the Bill.

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (ANTICIPATION AND
ADJUSTMENTS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading

Mel Stride accordingly presented a Bill to authorise the use of resources for the years ending with 31 March 2017, 31 March 2018 and 31 March 2019; to authorise the issue of sums out of the Consolidated Fund for the years ending 31 March 2018 and 31 March 2019; and to appropriate the supply authorised by this Act for the years ending with 31 March 2017 and 31 March 2018.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 171).

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 10 to 12 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

CORPORATION TAX

That the draft Enactment of Extra-Statutory Concessions Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

TRANSPORT

That the draft Renewable Transport Fuels and Greenhouse Gas Emissions Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING

That the draft Industrial Training Levy (Construction Industry Training Board) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 29 January, be approved.—(*Paul Maynard.*)

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION (INFORMATION COMMISSIONER (REMUNERATION))

Ordered,

That the Motion in the name of Margot James relating to Information Commissioner (Remuneration) shall be treated as if it related to an instrument subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Delegated Legislation Committees) in respect of which notice has been given that the instrument be approved.—(*Paul Maynard.*)

PETITION

Removal of Royal Mail Postal Collection

7.4 pm

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I rise to present a petition about the removal of the Royal Mail postal collection box on the High Street in Cottenham. The petition states

“that the residents and Parish Council of Cottenham in South Cambridgeshire are adversely affected by the removal of the Royal Mail postal collection box on the High Street”

and requests that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should make representations to Royal Mail to reinstate a collection box in the vicinity better to support residents in this rural area. The petition also states that the petitioners urge the Ministry and

“the Royal Mail to support the earliest possible re-instatement of a collection box in the central section of Cottenham High Street, one of the longest in England.”

This is an important issue for hundreds of my elderly residents, who rely heavily on being able to access a postbox in a rural location. I give special thanks to Audrey Brownlow and Councillor Frank Morris for first bringing this to my attention and for their tireless efforts. We look forward to a considered response from the Minister.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Cottenham, South Cambridgeshire,

Declares that the residents and Parish Council of Cottenham in South Cambridgeshire are adversely affected by the removal of the Royal Mail postal collection box on the High Street; and further that the Department of Communities and Local Government should make representations to Royal Mail to re-instate a collection box in the vicinity to better support residents in such rural areas.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Royal Mail to support the earliest possible re-instatement of a collection box in the central section of Cottenham High Street, one of the longest in England.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002112]

Mr Speaker: We now move on—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) has been thirsting to raise a point of order, mercifully briefly, I think, so I do beg her pardon.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wish to raise a point of order about the handling of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill in Committee. We agreed to have three days in Committee, and the Government set out an order of consideration that put clause 1 first. The Programming Sub-Committee then moved the consideration of clause 1 to after clause 18. When we reached that point this afternoon, the Government Whip moved that the Committee should adjourn. We opposed that on the grounds that we had had only two and a half hours for consideration, and we had another 40 clauses, 50 amendments and three schedules still to go. I do not know whether it is because the Government are afraid of a debate on the Magnitsky amendments to clause 1 or ashamed of their record on anti-money laundering, but were Government Whips to do this regularly, it would be possible to completely fillet the Committee stage. I seek your guidance, Mr Speaker, on what we can do about this.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her—I use this term in a non-pejorative sense—attempted point of order, and I am grateful to her for giving me advance notice. The reality, colleagues, is that the orderly conduct of business in a Public Bill Committee is a matter not for the Chair in this Chamber, but for the Chair in that Committee. I do not disregard or seek to rebut what the hon. Lady says about the logical course of events that could flow were this to be a regular practice, but nothing she has said leads me to believe that anything disorderly took place. It may well have been extremely vexing, and perhaps even a source of considerable consternation to the hon. Lady and others, but that is not the same as saying that anything disorderly took place. I have every confidence that the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan), who I understand chaired the proceedings, would have ensured that that was so.

The Committee took a decision to adjourn its proceedings to another day, and the hon. Lady opposed that decision and found herself, in the process, in a minority. I venture to suggest—again, I do so non-pejoratively—that this is not the first time that that has happened. Conceivably, it might not even be the last. The hon. Lady’s brow is furrowed, and what I mean by that is that this will not be the only occasion on which she has voted in a particular direction and found herself outnumbered. It is quite a commonplace experience if one is in opposition. It may be that the hon. Lady’s concerns about the conduct of proceedings in the Committee on the Bill can be assuaged during their course. If not, I do not doubt that she will find her salvation during her contributions on Report, which I have to say I await myself with keen anticipation. I think we must leave the matter there for now. If the hon. Lady was in pursuit of an immediate resolution of her grievance, that might have been optimistic. This is the best that I can offer her at this stage.

We come now to the Adjournment, for which the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) has been so patiently waiting.

Eating Disorders Awareness Week

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Paul Maynard.)

7.9 pm

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): Anorexia nervosa, a well-known eating disorder, has the highest mortality rate of any mental health condition. When eating disorders are not fatal, they can still lead to significant and long-lasting health issues. An estimated 1.25 million people in this country suffer from an eating disorder. Of course, it affects not just them but their families, yet eating disorders are all too rarely discussed in public.

We discuss with comparative ease physical illnesses that may devastate people's lives, but when it comes to mental illnesses this is too often not the case. That is also true of eating disorders. Despite the ever-increasing pressures of daily life leading to increased instances of poor mental health, we still do not speak about these issues enough. These illnesses can thrive on secrecy. The longer they go unchallenged and unacknowledged, the harder it is to beat them. It is only by talking about them, bringing them out of the shadows that we can reduce the power they hold over those who suffer. To really improve the lives of those with eating disorders and prevent those at risk from falling victim to these illnesses, we must bring eating disorders, as with all mental health issues, to the forefront of the collective deliberations and consciousness of our society. That is why, in this Eating Disorders Awareness Week, I am very pleased to have secured this important debate so that we in this House, the centre of our national debate, can talk about it and play our part, however small, in raising awareness and making it that bit easier for others to talk about it. I am very pleased that this Minister is responding to the debate, because I know she is a lady of compassion, dedication and determination to improve people's lives. May I also say, Mr Speaker, that with all the pressures on your time, I am pleased that you are in the Chair for the start of this debate, because I know the close interest you have taken in these issues as well?

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in commending the outstanding compassion and professionalism of the community team and other professionals at the Brownhill Centre in Cheltenham, who provide such a vital lifeline for those suffering with eating disorders?

Edward Argar: I will. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) highlighted earlier today the work of the SEED—Support and Education for Eating Disorders—organisation in Penwortham in her constituency. They are both absolutely right to highlight the work of such organisations.

As hon. Members may know, since my election to this House I have on a number of occasions raised health and mental health-related issues on behalf of my constituents and more widely. In this case, last year I accepted an invitation from Beat, the national eating disorder charity, to the launch of its important report, "Delaying for years, denied for months", which focuses on how long it takes from someone developing an eating disorder to their receiving treatment for it. It is a piece of research I will draw on extensively today.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Over the years, a number of my constituents have had these problems. Through the good work of the NHS and the Beat organisation, to which he has just referred, they have been able to pull through to the other end. In Northern Ireland, we have some 20,000 people who suffer from eating disorders at any one time. Given that fact, does he feel that the Government could enter into discussions with the regional assemblies across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to agree a strategy that can accommodate where we are in the UK?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. This is one of those issues on which I would hope we can see the widest engagement across the UK, across all involved in government and the provision of services, to come up with a coherent and common approach to beating eating disorders.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very good point. I wonder whether he has a feeling for how much extra training GPs will require to be able to spot the signs of these disorders.

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend makes a very important point and if he will perhaps be patient for a few more minutes, I will turn to, among other things, exactly that point.

At the launch that I referred to, I met and heard from some impressive and inspiring people, who had grappled with eating disorders and who wanted to share their experience and raise awareness. I subsequently met Beat to discuss its work and what more needs to be done. The people I met at Beat's launch event did something important and brave in speaking out, but they had already done something brave in seeking help for their illness in the first place.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): One of my constituents is an ambassador for Beat, and I met her recently. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the organisation's strengths is that it draws on people who have been through the experience, so they can speak knowingly and convincingly to people they recognise as being in the same situation that they were in not that long ago?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. It is always true in any situation that someone who has been there can speak with much more power and in a much more compelling way than someone who has not, however empathetic they are. The reality is that the recognition of an eating disorder for what it is—an illness—and getting the help and treatment for it is, all too often, still too slow. With an eating disorder, as with illnesses generally, the earlier an intervention and treatment take place, the easier it is to treat and the better the outcome for the patient.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that mental health services require the ability to provide advice and counselling, especially to younger people, and that in many cases that is lacking?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. Mental health services, whether they are statutory mental health services or supported services

from the voluntary sector, have to be able to address the needs of the individual as an individual. I will come shortly to funding and the provision of those services.

Beat's report last year found that the average cycle of relapse and recovery could be six years, and that it took an average of three and a half years, or 176 weeks, between someone getting an eating disorder and their getting the treatment that they need. That average of 176 weeks goes across people who are under 19 and adults. For those under 19, the average is 130 weeks, and for those over 19, the average is 256 weeks.

Those statistics are worth unpicking a little. It is important to be clear that 91 of the 176 weeks come before an individual or those around them recognise that they have an eating disorder, and a further 58 weeks come after that point, before they seek professional help. Increasing awareness of the symptoms of eating disorders is vital. As a recent YouGov survey found, 79% of the people who were surveyed could not list a single psychological symptom of eating disorders, and 34% were unable to name any correct sign or symptom. Alongside that, however, it takes real bravery for someone to admit to themselves that they need help. It is incredibly hard for someone to talk about an eating disorder.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this important debate to the Floor of the House. He says that it takes a lot of encouragement for people to say that they need help, and I commend the Government for their four-week target of 95% of patients to be seen within four weeks of referral. Will he join me in urging the Scottish Government to reduce the number of weeks from 18 weeks to four?

Edward Argar: I certainly join my hon. Friend in urging that. I daresay that were the Speaker to express a political opinion, he might, too, but of course, he cannot.

It will always take courage to talk about an eating disorder, but by talking about them in this House and in our communities, we can help to make it easier and to reduce the 149 weeks that I talked about. I hope that in the Minister's response, she will set out what is being done to raise awareness and to help the national conversation to take place, working alongside charities such as Beat.

The remaining 27 weeks of the total come from an average of 11 weeks between someone first visiting a GP and receiving a referral, often with three visits to a GP taking place before that happens; eight weeks between referral and formal assessment; and eight weeks from assessment to receiving treatment. We can and should be able to further reduce this 27-week period.

Let me be clear: this is not, and should not be, a partisan or party political issue. Governments of different political colours have all made significant progress, but of course there remains more we can all do. When someone has made the important leap to talking about their illness and seeking help, it is at this time that they are most receptive to engaging with that help when offered. When they make that leap of faith, we must meet them with action.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I want to unpack what my hon. Friend has just said and pay tribute to the work done by all Governments on this important issue. Ultimately, however, pressure on resources

sometimes means that people who seek help are effectively told to come back when they weigh less. That is at the heart of the challenge we have to address.

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend makes an important point. One of the key themes drawn out from this and related research is that it should not just be one symptom or factor that determines when someone needs help; there is a basket of factors and considerations that demonstrates when that need is there and when treatment is needed. He is absolutely right, therefore, to highlight that point.

As we know, GPs do an amazing job, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) said, we need to ensure that doctors' medical training gives them the tools they need in this area, as in others, to recognise all the symptoms of an eating disorder; and to ensure that that training is kept up to date and that medical professionals are familiar with and follow National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines on eating disorders, including its guidance that single measures—this touches on the point my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) has just made—such as body mass index and duration of illness alone should not be used to determine whether to offer treatment or what treatment to offer.

The Government have made huge strides in focusing on reducing delays through investment and funding and waiting-time targets, but these targets are not always fully applicable to everyone. As my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) set out, the Government have a target of 95% of non-urgent cases involving under-19s being seen for treatment within four weeks. I understand from the latest figures that that target is now being met in 79% of cases. That is good progress, but there is still more to do. It is vital, however, that these waiting-time standards for accessing treatment also apply to over-19s. I would welcome the Minister's reflections on that, and, of course, I reiterate what my hon. Friend the Member for Angus said and hope that the Scottish Government will follow the very positive lead set in this respect.

More broadly, I would also highlight the waits experienced for child and adolescent mental health services and adult mental health services more generally. In some parts of the country—I have highlighted this in my county of Leicestershire—delays in treatment can have a profound effect on individuals and the families who care for them. I hope that the Minister will touch more broadly on that bigger picture.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I attended an NSPCC event yesterday where we were made aware that young people, despite accounting for 20% of mental health need, receive only 9% of the mental health budget. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that more needs to be spent on meeting young people's mental health needs?

Edward Argar: I will come very shortly to overall spending, but part of that is not just the overall size of the pot, but how that money is spent and works its way through the system to reach the frontline. In 2016-17, we spent a record £11.6 billion on mental health services, and that amount will continue to rise year on year until 2020-21, by which point 21,000 new mental health posts

[Edward Argar]

will be in place. This is all very welcome, and I commend the Health Secretary and his colleagues in the Department for it. Funding is vital. However, although £30 million per annum will be available over the next five years to fund eating disorder services, the way in which such funds are spent by clinical commissioning groups sometimes lacks transparency. At times it is hard to follow the funding from its source to ensure that it reaches the frontline. Implementation is key, and I hope the Minister will tell us how the Government are working to ensure that every penny reaches the frontline eating disorder services for which it is needed.

Community-based mental health services are often the most effective local services to help people, but they and in-patient mental health services are commissioned separately, by the CCG and by NHS England respectively. That can lead to a sense of a lack of joined-up care, and it can mean that people have to receive treatment many miles from their homes and families. That can place a huge strain on families, and, indeed, on family finances. Beat's report suggests that in some instances the cost can be up to £32,000 as a result of lost earnings, travel and a range of other expenses. I believe that funds for eating disorder treatment should be held locally by the same budget holder in the same pot to create incentives for the development of improved treatment and reduced costly in-patient care, with CCGs working to extend their focus on early intervention to include the earlier stages of the illness.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Edward Argar: Very briefly.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is making an excellent speech. Would what he is suggesting include support in schools?

Edward Argar: That is indeed very important. A key issue is the need to ensure that, as far as possible, there can be school referrals or, indeed, self-referrals as well as referrals made via a professional medical route. Some people may choose those ways of reaching out for the help that they need.

I hope that the Minister can update us on the progress of NHS England's "Testing New Care Models in tertiary mental health services" pilot, which I understand is currently under way, and can tell us whether any initial findings are emerging in respect of the opportunity to put in-patient and community funding into a common pot.

I cannot end my speech without highlighting the impact that eating disorders have on the families and loved ones of those with the illness. Many of them care for people patiently and lovingly, and delays in securing the help that is needed can have devastating consequences for them. While in some cases it may not be appropriate, for good reasons, in many others, engaging those who are caring for someone receiving treatment—the "whole family" approach that I understand is used in Leicester, which will serve some of my constituents—can be hugely positive. I would welcome any reflections on that from the Minister.

Finally, I pay tribute to the work of Beat, which has campaigned tirelessly to highlight this issue, and to the work of those who operate its advice helpline. I commend its report to the Minister, and to all colleagues. However, I pay the greatest tribute to all those who suffer from an eating disorder and have had the bravery to talk about it, to seek the help that they need, and to face down an illness that depends on secrecy, isolates sufferers, and affects every aspect of their lives and those of their families. We must ensure that we match the courage of those who face it, determined to beat it, with an equal determination to give them the support, treatment and investment that they deserve. We must continue to drive down the delays and waiting times, raise awareness, and strip this disease of some of the power that it has over people by talking about it. We must stand shoulder to shoulder with all who face it, with the clear message that, together, we will beat eating disorders.

7.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) on initiating an extremely important and timely debate. I commend the sincerity and passion with which he has made his case. He has given me quite a long "to do" list, and I suspect that I shall have to come back to him, given the lateness of the hour.

You and I have attended many Adjournment debates together, Mr Deputy Speaker, and it is nice to see so many fellow Members here.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): In fairness, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is always here.

Jackie Doyle-Price: Indeed, and it is always a pleasure to see the hon. Gentleman in his place.

It illustrates the very real interest colleagues have in this important issue. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the work of the Department and NHS England in delivering on our commitment to better support people with eating disorders. As my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood said, eating disorders are both complex and devastating, and are serious life-threatening conditions with some of the highest mortality rates of any mental health disorder for many of the reasons he outlined: people often become so ill that they and their families do not realise how ingrained the problem is. These conditions can also have severe psychological, physical and social consequences, and they often start, and are prevalent in, young people, which is why early intervention is so crucial.

I will set out what we are doing to support children and young people, but that is not to diminish what my hon. Friend said about adults' needs, which I will come to later. Having said that early intervention is vital, everyone with an eating disorder must have access to timely treatment. That is why we have set up the first waiting times to improve access to eating disorder services for children and young people, so that by 2020 some 95% of children with an eating disorder will receive treatment within one week for urgent cases and within four weeks for routine cases. I am pleased to be able to report to the House that we are making good progress towards that goal. The latest figures published in the mental health "Five Year Forward View" dashboard

indicate that the NHS is on track to meet that standard, with almost 77% of all patients starting urgent treatment within one week and 83% of patients starting routine treatment within four weeks. That information is for the third quarter of 2017-18. We are making progress, but we still have to meet that goal. The number of people seeking treatment is rising, so we will need to make sure there is a commensurate increase in the ability for patients to get the care they need, as well as continue with our reduction in waiting times.

It is a testament to the work done by Members and Beat, and to the fact that there is greater general awareness, that more people are seeking treatment. Raising awareness and improving the understanding of eating disorders is important. My hon. Friend referred to community treatment, and it is our view that in-patient treatment should be seen as a last resort, which is why the Government announced in 2014 that we would invest £150 million to expand eating disorder community-based care. We are making good on that promise, and as a result 70 dedicated new or extended community services are now either open or in development. That will mean that at least 3,350 children and young people a year will receive swift, effective eating disorder treatment in the community.

The services are designed to give young people with eating disorders and who self-harm early access to services in their communities with properly trained teams. That reflects the fact that there was a lack of consistency, which needs to be tackled on a concerted basis so that we have fewer out-of-hours placements, recognising that the road to recovery is often quicker when people have access to their immediate family networks.

The services available include access to talking therapies, so that children and young people have a choice of evidence-based therapies, and a treatment plan agreed with their therapist and recorded outcomes, thereby avoiding the need for hospital stays. By improving care in the community, we can improve outcomes and recovery, and reduce rates of relapse or the numbers of young people transferring to adult services, which is another area of risk. We and NHS England want to make sure we have consistency in provision, and are investing in new in-patient care where there is seen to be a lack.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend highlighted the great work of Beat, and it is worth noting that the Secretary of State spoke at the launch of the Beat report and paid tribute to the young people who speak out. The bravery of those young people probably does more to raise awareness of eating disorders than anything any of us can do, despite our best intentions. Beat found that one in three adults in the UK could not name any signs or symptoms of eating disorders, which again shows we have a long way to go in raising awareness.

The Government understand the importance of increasing understanding and raising awareness. I will highlight some of the things we are doing in this area. First, we have published NICE guidelines on managing and treating eating disorders for everyone over the age of eight, including adults, children and young people. That guidance is available for healthcare professionals and commissioners who provide public services to people with eating disorders.

Secondly, we have set out ambitious plans in the children and young people's mental health Green Paper, partly to address the point made by the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous). We are trying to create new mental health teams in schools, perhaps the earliest of early interventions, recognising that the earlier we can intervene, the more likely we are to avoid longer-term damage and crisis and to achieve better outcomes with people who are struggling. Some 8,000 new NHS staff will work closely with those teams in schools to deliver that enhanced support.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood said, we talk a lot about children but what about the adults? To further improve adult eating disorder care, we have developed a pathway, together with detailed implementation guidance for providers. That is in development by the National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health, in partnership with NICE. It is being fully informed by the available evidence and the views of experts, and will increase healthcare professionals' awareness of the early signs and symptoms of eating disorders so that they too can refer their patients without delay.

Central to all this is the data collection that is being done by NHS England. My hon. Friend wanted to make sure that the moneys we are making available are actually being spent on the services on the ground, and that all clinical commissioning groups are delivering against their obligations. We are collecting that data. NHSE is undertaking a very close CCG-by-CCG analysis of exactly the pattern of care in each area so that we can make sure that everyone has access to prompt treatment and that we have consistency in access to provision.

Later this week, as it is Eating Disorders Awareness Week, I will be visiting the Bristol eating disorders health integration team—weather permitting, that is. This is a team of psychologists, academics, commissioners, care and support providers, and people with lived experience of eating disorders who are all working together to improve care and quality of life for people with eating disorders in Bristol. The team focuses on both prevention and treatment. If we can find examples of good practice and share them, we will go a long way towards achieving consistency of provision. I very much look forward to meeting those clinicians and experts-by-experience to see what we in Government can do to support them.

Again, I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this debate to the House. I am sure that this is not the last time that he will speak to me about this issue, because it is not the first time he has spoken to me about it either. I thank everyone for participating in the debate. I know that everyone here has a significant interest in mental health and those suffering with eating disorders. We all know that this can be the most fatal of all mental illnesses, and that every death is a tragedy. That is why we are very much committed to doing everything we can to combat this terrible illness.

Question put and agreed to.

7.38 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 27 February 2018

[SIOBHAIN McDONAGH *in the Chair*]

Private Probation Services

9.30 am

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered private probation services.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I am delighted to have secured this debate on the role of private probation services in our justice system, an extremely important topic that I have wanted to raise for some time, particularly in the light of the reported failings of community rehabilitation companies in the probation system. The Select Committee on Justice, of which I am a member, is discussing the future of rehabilitation this morning, but the complexities of the parliamentary timetable have meant that I am here instead.

The current situation stems from the splitting of probation services into two parts in the coalition Government's attempt to transform rehabilitation. Given the issues that I will address in my speech and the problems created by the implementation of the Offender Rehabilitation Act 2014 and the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, it is fair to say that justice policies have regressed since 2010. Probation services are now split between the national probation service, which is public and deals with high-risk offenders, and the outsourced, private community rehabilitation companies, which work with medium and low-risk offenders. The 21 CRCs were divided geographically and opened up to bids from the private sector and the third sector. Originally, 800 organisations—half from the voluntary sector—expressed an interest, but only one CRC is currently run by an organisation outside the private sector.

The primary objectives of the 2013 “Transforming Rehabilitation” initiative were to reform the system and reduce reoffending overall, partly with a Through the Gate method of enhanced rehabilitation that aims to provide prisoners with support and help in their resettlement as they make their transition back into civilian life. A prisoner in the transition stage at the end of their sentence usually requires assistance with accommodation, financial support and employment. However, as I will describe later, the original objectives are yet to be met. The reality is that the toxic privatisation of probation services has meant that CRCs continue to fail the people they were set up to help.

At the time of the reforms, Ian Lawrence, the general secretary of Napo, warned about organisational difficulties, cost and impact on communities and public safety. Furthermore, a leaked Ministry of Justice memo about the reforms said that there was a risk of

“an unacceptable drop in operational performance” during the programme, which might lead to “delivery failures and reputational damage”.

Those concerns were well founded. Since Her Majesty's inspectorate of probation began inspecting CRCs in summer 2016, it has found the majority to be operating below expectations. By the end of June 2017, CRCs had met an average of just eight of the 24 targets set under their contracts, and the worst-performing CRC met only four. If CRCs are incapable of reaching basic objectives, it casts great doubt on the ability of the whole exercise ever to reach the aims set out in the 2013 “Transforming Rehabilitation” consultation.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Our CRC in Gloucestershire, BGSW—Bristol, Gloucestershire, Somerset and Wiltshire—is owned by a European finance bank. It has had a number of poor reports, yet it seems to just carry on getting in the way of the voluntary sector, which does genuinely good work with ex-offenders. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is completely crazy that BGSW is allowed to continue?

Ellie Reeves: I agree that there are companies with little accountability, in which good work is not carried out and offenders are not properly managed. Often contact is made by telephone and probation officers do not contact offenders for months on end. I will address those points in more detail later, but I agree that the situation is unacceptable.

Probation is turning into a tick-box exercise, but it is not a profession that should be driven by targets; it requires a well-rounded approach centred on individuals and their needs, not—as we see all too often—on offenders' ability to provide profits to the CRC. In October 2016 and June 2017, joint inspections by Her Majesty's inspectorates of probation and of prisons led to reports on Through the Gate resettlement services for short-term prisoners and for those serving 12 months or more. The picture was described as “bleak”, with inspectors noting that CRCs are making little difference to prisoners' prospects on release. The latest annual report from Her Majesty's chief inspector of prisons states that

“too many prisoners continued to receive a poor resettlement service”,

that resettlement services provided to prisoners before and on release were generally poor, and that they made little, if any, difference to the life chances of those who received them.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Some private companies, especially in Wales, are supervising low and medium-risk offenders with periodic phone contact, as my hon. Friend mentioned. That would never have happened before; it is obviously a cost-cutting exercise.

Ellie Reeves: I agree. If offenders are contacted only by telephone, if appointments are missed without any follow-up and if months pass before there is contact from the probation service, the system is not working; it is driven by profit, rather than by the need to rehabilitate and prevent reoffending. That is all too often overlooked.

The HMIP report stated that in almost every respect, the quality of probation work was noticeably better across the national probation service than in the body of CRCs. That highlights the point that outsourcing and privatising probation services is just not working. It is clear that the fragmentation of services has led to an overall decline in communication and co-operation between

[*Ellie Reeves*]

stakeholders. The report is clear in its criticisms of CRCs and their pitiful attempts at Through the Gate rehabilitation. The conclusion of the chief inspectors was damning:

“The gap between aspiration and reality is so great, that we wonder whether there is any prospect that these services will deliver the desired impact on rates of reoffending.”

They also noted:

“If Through the Gate services were removed tomorrow, in our view the impact on the resettlement of prisoners would be negligible.”

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the failure of CRCs’ Through the Gate services will lead to more serious offending and therefore to more problems higher up for the national probation service?

Ellie Reeves: Yes. If the Through the Gate system is not working and if offenders are not resettled in the community with employment, housing and engagement with probation services to get their lives back on track, we know that they are more likely to reoffend. The CRCs are not getting reoffending rates down—they have failed to deliver that.

The “Transforming Rehabilitation” programme was not just about rehabilitation, but about protecting the public—a linchpin of any justice system. However, in a recent BBC “Panorama” documentary, Dame Glenys Stacey, the chief inspector of probation, stated that she could not say for certain that every private probation company was managing to protect the public as well as it should. In its investigation, “Panorama” spoke to an offender who was released from a short sentence in May. He said that he had not met his probation officer for almost a month after release, and that probation services were deteriorating; in the past, he knew exactly who his probation officer was, but now it was hard to tell. The CRC in that instance was MTCnovo, which covers all medium and low-risk offenders in London.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): From what my hon. Friend is saying, it seems that the current system is potentially putting the public in danger and, furthermore, the leaked memo shows that the Government must have been aware that that might happen. Is that the case?

Ellie Reeves: That is absolutely the case. If ex-offenders are released from prison but have no contact, or only very sporadic contact, with the probation services, how can the public be assured that they are being kept safe? The chief inspector has made that point and other people made it when the reforms were going through, but still no action has been taken and these CRCs continue to operate, which puts people at risk.

“Panorama” went on to say that it has records from MTCnovo that reveal that 15,000 appointments were missed by offenders over a 16-month period, a problem that was compounded by probation officers failing to take any action over missed appointments. A whistleblower from MTCnovo said that CRCs are employing fewer staff, so individual members of staff have higher case loads. That probation officer says that he now only has 20 minutes a month with the offenders he has to deal

with, which is simply not enough. He had inherited cases where 20 to 30 appointments had been missed by offenders, and in addition he said that staff were instructed by the CRC to alter records, so that missed appointments were wiped if they were more than two weeks old.

It seems that public protection is not at the heart of this programme, and the toxic climate created by this ill-judged privatisation has clearly had a detrimental impact on staff and services too. Following the creation of the National Probation Service and CRCs, existing staff were redistributed between the two organisations. From the start, CRCs had smaller case loads than predicted, which resulted in reduced levels of income, followed by restructuring with substantial job losses. Fewer staff can deal with fewer cases and the added focus on restructuring has often meant that the quality of core service delivery suffered. Low-risk offenders were often only supervised by telephone, as we have discussed, and work on safeguarding and domestic abuse was often substandard.

Three and a half years since the CRCs were created, it is clear that staff morale is low and individual case loads are too high. There are not enough staff, and many of them lack the experience and resources to do the job properly.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Does my hon. Friend agree that there are a large number of highly skilled and experienced probation officers who have been lost due to their being placed in the private side of the organisation, which is not always through their own choice?

Ellie Reeves: I agree with that assessment and there is now a situation where there have been substantial job losses, so that a lot of very experienced probation officers are no longer in post. The system is one where staff are overworked and do not necessarily have the skills and equipment that they need.

I will come on to some of the findings of a Unison survey. Unison has 3,500 members working across CRCs and the National Probation Service. It carried out a survey of members who work for CRCs and the 215 responses that it received make for really shocking reading. Twenty-five per cent. of staff said that they only occasionally had the equipment, resources or systems they needed to do their jobs properly; 41% said that they never experienced a manageable case load; 25% said that their CRC never or only occasionally completed community orders within the required time; and 43% said they never felt valued by their CRC.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Does the hon. Lady share my concern that CRCs received extra funding from the Government that was worth £37.15 million in the 2016-17 financial year, but because of the secrecy of the contracts between the Government and CRCs we cannot break that down to the level of individual companies or even receive the details of those contracts?

Ellie Reeves: I thank the hon. Lady for making that point. After I have said a little bit about staff and morale, I will go on to talk a little bit about the financial bailout of CRCs, because it is really important that we recognise the additional money that has gone into propping

up these failing companies. However, I will complete my points about staff morale and then move on to that issue.

I want to flag up some of the things that probation staff said in response to the Unison survey. One said:

“Chaotic, frustrating and exhausting. Caseloads are too high and I don’t feel as if I do anything to protect the public anymore, I simply process people. Service users...often comment as to how impersonal our service is now and that they feel telephone contact with offender managers is inadequate. Very sad knowing that I used to do good work.”

Another said:

“I have inherited a new caseload since early 2017—many cases have not been contacted for months—one case today I managed to contact had not heard from anyone at Probation for 16 months in a 24-month suspended sentence. It is not good enough.”

Perhaps the most damning response was this one:

“I feel stressed, de-professionalised and ready to give it up. This government have transformed rehabilitation alright. They have ruined it.”

Probation is ultimately a caring profession and it should be viewed as being a bit like teaching or social work. However, it is clear that those who work within the service are being hugely let down by privatised and profit-driven CRCs. That is summed up by the underlying tension between CRCs meeting contractual obligations and their responding to the needs of offenders, with the latter receiving much less attention than the former. Shockingly the Government are now in a position where, as has already been said, they are bailing out CRCs at a cost of millions of pounds. As things stand, CRCs are paid for the volume of rehabilitation activity.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does she agree that linking payment to demand has not only affected service in times of low requirement, but has made the position of the Work First employees, whom she has described in such detail, much worse, so that many of them are suffering from low morale and are in precarious employment?

Ellie Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point, and she is absolutely right. If a system is introduced whereby people are paid by results, that turns probation into the tick-box exercise that we have seen. It is not focused on rehabilitation and public protection but on making sure that all the right boxes are ticked, so that the CRC can generate profit. Profit-driven rather than people-driven is what has happened to the probation service.

CRCs are paid for the volume of rehabilitation activity that they carry out, rather than for the number of offenders that are supervised. The Ministry of Justice originally claimed that it would transfer the commercial risk of future volumes of rehabilitation activity going down, as well as up, to CRCs. They are paid in a complex way, with different payment bands for the provision of different types of rehabilitation service. However, the current volumes of activity that CRCs are paid for are far below the levels expected when the contracts were awarded.

According to National Audit Office figures, in 2015-16, the activities undertaken by CRCs ranged from 8% to 34% less than originally anticipated. In the first quarter of 2017-18, volumes of activity ranged from 16% to 48% less than anticipated. At the same time, the number

of offenders supervised by CRCs increased by 20%. In effect, CRCs have to look after more offenders but do less work.

Moreover, as has become common across many private sector initiatives that have been put out to tender, CRCs underestimated their fixed costs when bidding for contracts. However, the MOJ agreed that the taxpayer, not the private companies, should shoulder that cost as well. So far, this is predicted to have cost the taxpayer an additional £342 million through a bailout of companies that was followed by adjustments made to the payment mechanism last year. It is not as if the MOJ is beyond rectifying the situation, as it has many tools at its disposal. It is entitled to fine the CRCs for poor performance, but it has either waived or allowed CRCs to reinvest 71% of the total fines due to the taxpayer.

One option that the MOJ considered in respect of poor performance by CRCs was to terminate some, or all, of their contracts. However, it decided instead to let the taxpayer take the strain of the failing contracts by amending the contract payment mechanisms to give the CRCs more money. It is clear that the privatisation of probation services has failed, and the overarching point, which repeats itself time and again, is that this is yet another example of Government-led privatisation that has gone wrong. The original arrangement and subsequent contracts were not fit for purpose in the first place, and what we are left with is a system driven by the ideological desire to privatise key elements of our justice system and defend the cause even when it evidently fails.

The idea of a Government bailing out a private sector service when the prison and rehabilitation services are in crisis should concern us all, particularly given that ageing, dilapidated prisons are falling apart—HMP Liverpool has been described as having the worst conditions inspectors have ever seen—services within prisons are grinding to a halt, with mental health assessments taking far too long, prisoners are denied access to education and rehabilitation facilities, and a quarter of prisoners are accommodated in overcrowded conditions. Notwithstanding the cost of CRCs on the public purse, how many more reasons do the Government need before they take the prisons crisis seriously, take control of the rehabilitation of offenders and make our justice system fit for purpose? Rehabilitation in the community, if executed correctly, can be a key factor in reducing reoffending, but how can services that continue to be rated as poor by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of probation continue to qualify for these massive payments from central Government while not even doing the job they are paid to do? It is time, once and for all, to bring the failed schemes back under public control, so that we can get to the root causes of reoffending and provide rehabilitation services that are fit for purpose.

9.51 am

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I thank the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) for securing this important debate and introducing it excellently. I declare an interest as co-chair of the justice unions and family courts parliamentary group.

In the 2010 coalition agreement, the Government promised a rehabilitation revolution, but with the privatisation of probation companies, we have instead

[Liz Saville Roberts]

had a fundamental erosion of the humanitarian principles that underpin meaningful rehabilitation. The Government refuse to acknowledge that their blinkered ideology of privatisation has failed and, in so doing, they are failing with regard to the basic premise of justice as a common good for all of society.

Good offender management is inseparable from quality probation supervision. In its most recent report, Her Majesty's inspectorate of probation warns that it had found

"CRCs stretched beyond their capacity"

and that, in many CRCs,

"case management itself is insufficient to enable good enforcement decisions",

which statistics in the report confirm—only 37% of CRC enforcement cases sampled involved good-quality assessment of the likelihood of reoffending, compared with 83% in the public sector national probation service. It is said that we should not compare CRCs with the NPS, but the most serious crimes lie with the NPS, and when we see figures of 37% versus 83%, there are questions to be answered.

That is wholly unsurprising when we look at how CRCs supervise people, with infrequent meetings, and sometimes only by phone, which breaks the face-to-face relationships that are vital to successful probation work. That lack of meaningful engagement has led to poor decisions in managing breaches of orders. The recent HMIP report also reveals that, in more than half of all inspected cases in which CRCs had returned service users to court, the decision to enforce was not appropriate, compared with just 14% of NPS cases. It appears that CRCs were "seldom" making such decisions on the risk of harm posed or the likelihood of reoffending.

CRCs are private companies. At best, they are motivated by the detail of contract compliance, rather than by the true quality of supervision. The ethos of public service and motivation of care are not their primary drivers. Does the Minister finally recognise that dismantling the probation service and replacing it with a part-privatised model has failed, and will he commit his Government to listening to the professionals when they call for an end to profiting from probation?

It is all very well to talk in statistics, but the failings have real consequences for real families. Almost three years ago, in March 2015, an innocent young man was murdered by an offender who was meant to be under the supervision of Working Links, the CRC operating in Wales. Conner Marshall, an 18-year-old, was staying with friends at a caravan site in Porthcawl, Bridgend when he was attacked in a case of mistaken identity. High on a cocktail of alcohol and drugs, his killer stamped on his face, kicked him in the ribs, stripped him naked and hit him repeatedly with a metal pole. The individual has been jailed for life after having been found guilty of murder. Conner's killer was on community probation for a string of offences, including domestic violence and animal cruelty. He was on curfew and ordered to attend anti-drugs and alcohol meetings, but failed to turn up to several of them. Procedures were not followed. There were eight missed appointments, six of which were without valid reason. That was eight missed opportunities to rein in the murderer and implement the breach conditions. The opportunities were never taken,

and he was not stopped. On behalf of Conner's mother, Nadine Marshall, I emphasise that at present there are no representation policies for the families of victims in such horrific and tragic circumstances.

The system as it currently operates is not fit for purpose. Less than a decade ago, we were promised a rehabilitation revolution. Will the Minister confirm whether, and if so when, the wheel will finally turn beyond this failed revolution?

9.55 am

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) on securing this important debate. I want to make some brief remarks about what people who work in probation in Plymouth have told me. We owe them a debt of thanks.

The Government's part-privatisation of probation has been a colossal failure. The broken system is putting the public at greater risk and increasingly leaving taxpayers out of pocket. Ministers knew before the privatisation was put in place that the system would not work. Experts told them that it would conflict with best practice and put added pressure on staff, yet they went ahead. When it was obvious that the early CRCs were failing, the privatisation continued, meaning that people who relied on probation services to be professional and of high quality were being failed and, as a result, so were the public. Ministers must now know that it is unacceptable for the Government to continually bail out CRCs. It is time to draw a line in the sand. With our prisons in crisis, we need probation to perform without hindrance, organisational chaos and uncertainty.

The whole criminal justice system needs to be improved because it is not working. CRCs are not working. I fear that Ministers, not for the first time, are defending a broken system made worse by privatisation. Probation cannot wait for a Labour Government to end the shambles and bring the contracts back into the public sector, so we must put pressure on Ministers to act now. I fear that Ministers are conforming to type. When privatisation goes wrong they first defend the failure of the privatised services. Secondly, they reward the failure, as we see in the bailing out of CRCs. Finally, there is a continued failure to tackle the root causes of the problem: putting profit ahead of people, fragmentation of the services, and the way in which the system undervalues staff and misses results. Defending failure, rewarding failure and failing to tackle the root causes are the hallmarks not only of what has happened to probation services, but of the privatisation of our NHS, and we need to call it out. Probation is too important to let privatisation fail. We must make the system work, and if that cannot be done by bringing the contracts back in house, Ministers need to get a grip on the system.

Probation staff in Plymouth have told me a variety of stories about their experience of working in the system and about what it means for the people they are trying to help. It is worth remembering that people who work in probation do so because they want to make the lives of the people they work with better, reduce reoffending and protect the public. They show a genuine, caring devotion. They do not go into probation because they are looking for big pay cheques—they would be looking in the wrong place—but because they want to make a

difference. That good will and the hard work of the staff is possibly the only thing that is holding the probation system together.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Following privatisation, probation officers in the national probation service have carried ridiculously high case loads of offenders who pose high or very high risk of harm. Probation officers working in the public sector do not have a balanced case load of medium and high-risk cases any more, as there was before the split. The pressure and stress of those cases together with the insufficient number of probation officers to do the job has resulted in unmanageable case loads and higher levels of sickness among staff. Has that been found in Plymouth?

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Having about 60 cases per individual maintains professionalism and a safe level of contact with offenders. It is now being reported that, in some cases, probation officers are handling 200 cases. The Minister has a famously good memory, but not everyone who works in probation has that. Remembering the details of 200 cases is asking too much of those who work in our probation system.

The staff I have spoken to in Plymouth have told me that they feel undervalued and overworked. The best practice that they spent years developing has been taken out of the system and good methods of rehabilitation have been stripped back. Staff have told me that they are worried that things are only going to get worse. One member of staff told me that she went into the profession because she cared. She told me that she loves her job, but all too frequently she is going home at night and crying because she knows that the level of care and professionalism she is able to offer is not what she would like. That damages her feeling of self-worth and of being valued by the system. These are precisely the type of people we need to retain and support in our probation system. It is a poor way to treat the people who keep our public safe.

In Plymouth, the failures of our probation system were brought home on new year's day 2015 by the murder of Tanis Bhandari in Tamerton Foliot, which is in the constituency of the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer). In Plymouth, there has been a debate, led most ably by Councillor Philippa Davey, about the failures of probation to monitor Donald Pemberton at the time when he and Ryan Williams murdered the Plymouth builder, Tanis. Tanis was an incredibly popular figure within Plymouth, and the failure of the probation system to monitor the offenders probably directly led to that murder, because a better managed system would reduce reoffending. A poor probation system has real-world consequences, and Tanis's family is one of the many families across the country that are being let down by a system that is not working and is clearly failing. How many more families need to be let down for Ministers to act?

The CRC system is not working. It needs to be brought back in house. I ask the Minister not to do the three things that we frequently hear from Ministers on broken prioritisation systems. Please do not defend the failure of the system or reward it any further. Please tackle the root cause: a broken and fragmented prioritisation

system that is not working. Our public and the staff who do such an amazing job in our probation service deserve much better.

10.3 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I apologise to the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman), who I thought would have been called before me. We will hear her comments later on.

We do not have private probation services in Northern Ireland, but I have been sent some information and I want to add constructively to the debate if I can. I will focus on the individuals and how they can be rehabilitated in prison, as well as the family units. It is important that we focus on the effects on all the people.

I thank the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) for securing this debate and for setting the scene so well, as she always does. The issue does not directly affect Northern Ireland, yet there are lessons to be learned for all the regions of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We have a prison system groaning under the weight of the pressures on it. We have a judicial system that is extremely aware that it can imprison only if it is essential, because there is no room. We have a probation system that is still failing to rehabilitate prisoners, to the detriment of every member of society. I am not here to point the finger at the Department or the Minister. That is not my form; but neither is it my form to ignore issues that have been raised. That is why we are all here today, and Members have put forward pertinent points in their contributions and interventions.

There is an issue with the new system that needs to be addressed. I say that not to score political points or to demonstrate that my ideas are better than those of others; we simply have to do the best we can by offenders. We need to put in place structures that support them. Through that, we can help to prevent reoffending. The issues with reoffending are important.

Dr Drew: Would the hon. Gentleman accept that one of the fundamental failings is the lack of continuity between what happens in prison, where there is a need for people to be properly rehabilitated and prepared for release, and what happens afterwards? If my area is anything to go by, there is no overlap; things have to start again as soon as people are released. That means that offenders and ex-offenders feel completely let down.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I will touch on that issue, because it is important that we have that follow on. What happens next after someone gets out of prison is a clear issue.

It is sometimes easy to fall into a mentality of seeing those in prison as lost causes, but that is not something I believe at all. I believe that all people can make mistakes and that they can put right those mistakes and become contributors to their communities again. The hon. Gentleman and others have referred to that. I know a few good men who society washed their hands of during the troubles in Northern Ireland, yet they were given the opportunity by one tender-hearted person and are now upstanding pillars of the community. People can change, and we have a responsibility to

[Jim Shannon]

enable that change to take place. It may not work for every individual, but it can work for a great many. I know people who have changed. That is the reality. We need to focus on what can be achieved and how we can achieve it. That has to be our goal and purpose.

I was surprised to learn that one in 10 people in England and Wales are released back to their community without a roof over their head. That simply should not be. They should not be released with a metaphorical boot to the backside, without so much as a by-your-leave. In some cases, that seems to be the way it is, and it is hard to understand why. We must ensure that they not only have somewhere to sleep the day they come home, but that they have something meaningful to achieve the next morning. We have a rehabilitation process for people to go through when they are in prison and when they get out. If they are going home to nothing, it is little wonder that it is so easy to get into the same routine. We must ask how we can do things differently. How can we get these men and women involved in our society in a meaningful and helpful way?

Thus far, the private probation services have been unable to make a difference. I do not want to be unduly critical, but that is what the evidential base indicates. Indeed, some reports indicate that incidences of reoccurrence have intensified. If they are intensifying, as was referred to in an intervention, that may be because a phone call does not achieve what a meeting or appointment can. I suggest to the Minister that it should be a meeting or appointment. That is more constructive and face-to-face, and it can make changes. Printing off a housing form does not achieve the results that attending the housing executive—in England, it is the local council—does. We should not mollycoddle these people, but if we believe in the justice system at all, we believe they have paid their debt to society and deserve help to find their way in a different world. We should encourage them to do so.

I also think of the children and families of offenders. It is essential that follow-up services are provided for the sake of those nearest and dearest to them. A report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation highlighted that prisoners' families were vulnerable to financial instability, poverty, debt and potential housing disruption following the imprisonment of a family member. It can be easy to forget that these issues affect not just the individual, but the whole family unit. The report found that families subsidised imprisonment by sending prisoners money, clothing and electronic goods. The responsibility to help those in prison financially often falls to a great extent on families. Disadvantage associated with imprisonment includes high rates of depression—sometimes the health spin-offs are not taken on board—physical illness, housing disruption and, for families of foreign national prisoners, permanent separation after deportation. Again, that is perhaps not an issue for this debate, but it is certainly something that the system should address.

The report also highlighted how prisoners' partners and mothers prioritised the care needs of children above household income, and there is an impact on children at school, where we know that peer pressure can be difficult. Barriers to employment were magnified for those caring for prisoners' children. The complications are enormous. When someone comes out of prison to a family under

such strain and pressure, it is easy to see how they could go back to their old ways, not understanding that breaking the cycle will help to heal the hurt that their family is going through. That should be taken into consideration and should be a priority for the Government when discussing how to rehabilitate prisoners successfully. That should be our goal. I know the Minister wants that, as we all do in this House.

To conclude, I cannot say how the shortfall has come about, but we must all acknowledge—as Members who have contributed so far have indicated—that there is a definite shortfall that we must address for our communities. I hope the Minister, whom we all respect highly, will tell us how he intends to do that, either in the new private system or by taking back the reins, which is what I think the Members here want. Decisions need to be made, and for the sake of our family units we must ensure that changes are made as a matter of urgency.

10.11 am

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): It is good to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh, and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who made interesting points. I welcome his comment about taking back the reins, because that gets to the heart of the matter. Because of the fragmentation of the system, nobody is holding the reins in the way that they once did when looking at the rehabilitation of offenders outside of prison. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) on securing this debate. This area of justice policy has never had the scrutiny and interest that it deserves from Members or the media, or from anywhere. It is good to see Members in this place taking a lead and putting the spotlight on this issue, because it is so important.

Sadly, the situation today was entirely predictable. It has been a disaster and it was avoidable, but it could be remedied. I know that the Minister was not in the Ministry of Justice when the decisions were taken, so we do not blame him, but he now has the opportunity to reverse some of the decisions that have led to the catastrophe in the service. If he does not take that opportunity, he will be responsible for that and we will hold him to it. If he were to indicate that he might review the system or look at reunifying probation services, I am sure—although I cannot speak for my Front-Bench colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain)—that he would have the wholehearted support of Opposition parties across the House.

The warnings about the Government's mistake came not only from the Labour party, but from staff, the unions and academics, and from people from other jurisdictions where similar things had been attempted. Nobody that I could find thought the Government were taking the right approach.

There was not much scrutiny at the time of how the changes would affect probation staff—the professionals who had decided to dedicate their working lives to working with some of the most incredibly difficult people in society. I have had limited experience of working with offenders, and they are flippin' difficult. They do not always tell you the truth, so the idea of assessing what they are doing with their lives, what they intend to do next or what control they have over their

own decision making, all on the basis of a phone call, is completely implausible to most people with any experience of working with such individuals. We have separated not only offenders, but a group of professionals who were very good at sharing knowledge, supporting one another and working with a mix of offenders. Working with serious offenders all the time is difficult, stressful and emotionally hard work.

The Minister needs to read some of the court reports that detail some of the offences committed by offenders to see how that affects him. I do not think the supervision needed when working with such groups of offenders has ever really been properly provided, but it is even more difficult now, when individuals work with those types of offenders all the time. It is incredibly difficult work. Previously, someone might go into probation and work with some low or medium-risk offenders for a while and gradually take on higher-risk individuals under supervision. That progression and development in practice and that knowledge and understanding have been lost. That is a real loss to the service. We might not be seeing the impact just yet, but we will increasingly see it over time.

Liz Saville Roberts: The Government have argued in the past that we had not allowed enough time to review the performance of CRCs, but we are now more than two years after payment by results was brought in, so it is time to review whether it is working effectively or not.

Jenny Chapman: I agree: now is the moment. It would have been better to run a pilot, but the Government were determined to embark on a mission that was so fundamentally flawed it was never going to work. Had they been so minded, they could have piloted the approach and gathered evidence of the problems. That would have caused far less damage than selling off half the service in 35 different trust areas in one go and thinking that everything would go smoothly. They removed any opportunity for learning in the process, and that was reckless. It is something that the Government, even if they will not say so publicly, really ought to reflect on and probably should regret.

Selling off all the areas at once was incredibly high risk. The then Secretary of State, the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), was asked at the time why he was so determined to do it. I remember this clearly and was quite shocked. He was asked for any evidence from anywhere to justify such a reckless move, and he simply said that he had inner belief that it would work. He was determined to prove it, and then he went off to run the trains. What the Government did was a mistake. It was stupid and is not something that this Minister would want to repeat. I am sure he is somebody who will look at evidence and take into account the track record of CRCs. He needs to make decisions that will change the current structures.

The whole thing has been based on the flawed premise that offenders fall neatly into two separate groups, but they do not. Risk fluctuates constantly. It takes experienced probation officers to assess that—to notice it, to know what they are supposed to look for and then to know what to do when they suspect the risk might be about to change.

We are talking about an incredibly difficult group of people. Probably everybody here has heard this, but I want to get some characteristics of offenders on the

record—27% having been taken into care, compared with 2% of the general population; 49% having been excluded from school, compared with 2%; numeracy and literacy levels of an 11-year-old or below at 65% and 48% respectively; 72% of men and 70% of women with two or more mental disorders; 83% of men with a history of hazardous drinking; drug misuse at 66%. We are not talking about people who have just got themselves on the earliest steps to a life of criminality. These are chaotic, confused people, with very little control over what they do. In the sector, they would probably say they are bang at it and are only getting lifted for a proportion of what they are up to. Probation work is incredibly difficult and it relies on the good will, professionalism and experience of an outstanding workforce. To be successful, we need to harness the very best practice in the profession and make that available to all offenders.

The trusts could have delivered that. They were doing a good job and met all the targets they were set by successive Governments. They were independently assessed at the time as excellent. Had the Government wanted them to behave in a different way, such as to work more collaboratively with voluntary and community sector organisations, they should have made that clear to trusts and made that a target. I am confident that the trusts would have been able to deliver on the objectives set them by the Government, even the ambition of wanting to supervise those being released from a prison sentence of less than 12 months. That was one of the objectives the Government set at the time. I do not deny that it was a good objective, but there was no attempt at all to try to achieve it within the existing arrangements. That was negligent and arrogant. It was a bullish approach from Ministers at the time, and it was a real mistake.

This is a complex issue, but it is incredibly high stakes. Splitting the service has been an error. I urge Ministers to listen now in a way that they did not at that time, and to take whatever steps are necessary to reverse the decision and keep the public safe.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): There being no other Back-Bench Members wishing to speak, I call the shadow Minister.

10.21 am

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I begin by joining other hon. Members in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) on securing this debate. Hon. Members are absolutely right that this issue does not get the airtime that it deserves. It needs discussion. My hon. Friend made a powerful speech, comprehensively setting out the factual background to the formation of the community rehabilitation companies and setting out the failures with great clarity, as did many other hon. Members. I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in this important debate.

It is clear from listening to the contributions that—let us be clear and frank—the state of probation is dire. Although there were problems back in 2015, probation never used to look like this. The Government's ill-fated reform agenda, "Transforming Rehabilitation", has been nothing short of a failure. It has failed offender rehabilitation, with many left ill-equipped for life on

[Imran Hussain]

the outside. It has failed prison officers and governors, who are seeing their prisons pushed to breaking point by overcrowding, and it has failed the public, who are bearing the financial and safety brunt of the failures. The only group that it has not failed, as has quite rightly been pointed out, are the private companies that are lining their pockets.

When reforming probation, the Government had the opportunity to make things better, transform rehabilitation, improve the prospects of offenders and slash reoffending, which is costing the country £15 billion a year. What they delivered was not so much transforming rehabilitation as privatising rehabilitation, weakening rehabilitation and ultimately destroying rehabilitation. By almost every metric and every means by which to measure its effectiveness and its success, it has failed, and some aspects have failed spectacularly.

Hon. Members have quite rightly mentioned the failures of the Through the Gate services, which have been a complete disaster. In 2015, the then Prisons Minister stated that those services would provide

“support to offenders for accommodation needs, employment brokerage and retention, finance and debt advice”.

I have seen very little evidence that that support is being provided and no sign of real, joined-up services to support offender rehabilitation.

The HMIP report and its conclusions on Through the Gate services have been referred to. What it found was startling, particularly in the areas of support the Ministry of Justice identified. Of its sample of short-term prisoners, just 31% had sufficient work done with them to meet their accommodation needs, just 33% their education and training needs, and just 12% their finance, benefit and debt advice needs. Some 10% of the sample found themselves homeless on release. Another report by HMIP found, quite worryingly, that not one offender had been helped by Through the Gate services to enter education, training or employment after release.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. For the benefit of the Chair and for *Hansard*, it might be better if the shadow Minister swivelled round a little and spoke into the microphone.

Imran Hussain: My apologies, Ms McDonagh. End-to-end offender management is vital to stop reoffending, and HMIP has set out a minimum level of requirements for resettlement. However, it is clear that Through the Gate services, when provided by private probation companies, cannot deliver. They cannot support offender rehabilitation and they cannot prepare them for life on the outside after release. It is that inability to support offenders that ensures that a privatised probation system can do nothing to stop reoffending.

Currently, around two in three prisoners serving sentences of less than 12 months reoffend. One in three prisoners on longer sentences reoffend. Stopping reoffending is the very core of a probation company's goal. It is its purpose, yet 19 out of 21 private probation companies have seen an increase in reoffending because they are treating probation not as an important service but as a box-ticking exercise. There is little to no meaningful engagement, with supervision of offenders taking place

over the phone, as has been pointed out. If they do meet face-to-face, it is sometimes in a very public space with no privacy, such as in a library.

The MOJ stated that the “Transforming Rehabilitation” programme would allow providers to focus relentlessly on driving down reoffending, but that has clearly not happened, as if they are not properly supported, offenders cannot be helped in not reoffending. That does not just impact on offender rehabilitation. It has knock-on effects for prisons, as those reoffending are sent back to an overcrowded prison system, which in 2015-16 saw, on average, almost 21,000 prisoners held in overcrowded accommodation. That in turn affects prison safety, as fewer prison officers are dealing with more prisoners. The rampant and increasing violence we are seeing in prisons is just one by-product of overcrowding, putting prison officers and prisoner safety at risk.

Probation failures are not just failing those criminal justice professionals by putting their safety at risk; they are failing the judicial system, which finds itself with fewer options for sentencing. An independent judiciary that can use its discretion to a degree is an important pillar of justice, but as there is increasing distrust of CRCs to deliver community sentences, it finds itself with fewer options.

However far removed all this might be perceived to be from many people's lives, with many of them never having an interaction with prison and probation services, the Government's changes to probation have also failed the public. People expect safety and security in the knowledge that we have a criminal justice system that works; they expect judges to have a range of options open to them; they expect offenders to be punished when they go to prison; to be rehabilitated while there; and to be released back into the community as changed persons ready to contribute to society. But prison is not working, with increasing violence and persistent overcrowding, and neither is probation. Offenders are released back into communities without proper reform, as we see from the failure of Through the Gate services, and without proper supervision, as we see with private probation companies supervising them by phone.

The decision to privatise night-waking watch staff and replace them with minimum-wage staff at probation hostels, which house the most dangerous ex-offenders, further threatens safety and shows that the Government have not learned the lessons from privatising justice. Two people have been killed at probation hostels in the past year. The cost of reoffending totals about £15 billion a year, according to the Work and Pensions Committee. The public are footing the bill for overcrowding and reoffending, and their safety is being compromised.

The Government's probation privatisation is failing offender rehabilitation, criminal justice professionals and the public, but not private companies, which, in fact, have quite a comfortable life. They have taken on contracts over which the MOJ has little oversight. They have failed in their goal of reducing reoffending, and there have been numerous critical reports from the probation inspector, yet no sanctions have been applied to them. If any other organisation failed in its objectives, its contracts would be wound up, so why not probation companies? They have not received the financial benefits they expected, but all they have to do is cry about falling profits and the Government bail them out. Some £22 million was handed over before any changes were made.

No questions were asked, and there was no scrutiny of the private probation companies to prevent future failings. Instead, the Government changed the contracts afterwards to make things easier. The private probation companies are getting away with failure and are frankly being rewarded for it.

The creation of private probation companies has been a disaster, and the reform of probation has been an extraordinary failure. The companies have let down everyone they have come across and are not fit for purpose. I have a number of questions for the Minister. He and I have worked together on other policy areas, and I know that he is quite an amiable, reasonable chap. He has the opportunity today to really listen, to address this issue and to start afresh. Nobody will accept that the privatisation of probation has not been a failure.

My asks of the Minister are these. Will he accept that Through the Gate services have failed, and will he put in place changes in conjunction with other Departments to deliver joined-up services so that offenders are given every opportunity to be rehabilitated on release? What is the contingency plan in the event of the collapse of Interserve, which, as I am sure he will agree, is increasingly likely? Has his Department learned lessons from this disaster, and will it keep people safe by abandoning its plans to privatise the night-waking watch in probation hostels? Finally, will he accept that transforming rehabilitation has been a failure, and will he commit to take probation back in-house to deliver a probation service that works for offender rehabilitation, the criminal justice system and the public, not for private, profit-making companies?

10.33 am

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart):

It is a great privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) on securing this debate, which is hugely important, given the risk that criminals can pose to the public, as the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) eloquently put it. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) expressed the very important idea that people can change and improve, and that the public can be protected through that individual journey.

We have always faced fundamental challenges, but the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge is absolutely right that there have been very significant challenges since 2014. However, let me briefly take it back to before 2014. As the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) pointed out, the reality is that it is and has always been extremely difficult to do this kind of work. Before the privatisation of 2014, for nearly 30 or 40 years, probation services worked extremely hard under different Governments to reduce reoffending, and over a 40-year period the reoffending rate barely moved. It hovered around 50% within one year and 70% within nine years. It did not matter whether people were involved with innovative housing, mental health or employment projects. It was stubbornly difficult to reduce reoffending.

Despite all the problems with Through the Gate services that the hon. Member for Bradford East talked about, those services effectively did not exist before 2014. I was at Nottingham prison yesterday. Before 2014, nobody in the prison would have been working on the

initial five-day assessment and the pre-12-week assessment to ensure that prisoners are properly co-ordinated Through the Gate. The CRC is now embedded in the building. It is also true that, even before 2014, there were sadly a number of issues with people coming out of prison, reoffending and harming the public.

I take very seriously the complaints that have been made. Those are serious observations by Members of Parliament and the chief inspector, who found and raised powerfully significant problems relating to morale—in particular, staff morale—case load, which the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) raised, and the tragedy when things go wrong. The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) described the horrifying situation that happened to her constituent, Conner, when somebody who was supervised under a CRC contract reoffended.

All those things need to be gripped and dealt with. The disagreement between the Government and the Opposition is that, for a number of reasons, I do not believe the question is only whether the service should be provided by the public sector or the private sector. Many of these issues predate the privatisation. There were very significant problems with probation in 2010, 2012 and 2014. It made sense—on this, I defend my predecessors—to try to work out how to deal with some of those stubborn problems, including, first, the absence of any proper Through the Gate services; secondly, the fact that before 2014, 40,000 prolific reoffenders were not supervised at all; and, thirdly, how on earth to deal with the stubborn reoffending rate of 50%. It seemed perfectly justifiable that people would try to think about how we could focus relentlessly on dropping the reoffending rate and on encouraging innovation. Why innovation? Because an enormous number of voluntary-sector organisations and charities around the country have proved that the reoffending rates can be reduced. I was looking at a recent example in Stafford, where a chaplaincy housing project has managed to reduce the reoffending of persistent reoffenders—a very tough group to work with—from 50% to what appears to be about 17%. There are similar examples, such as the Clink restaurant in Brixton Prison. Meeting people at the gate, finding them a job and putting them into the catering industry reduces reoffending dramatically. The idea of the reform was to try to bring some of those new ideas into the system.

Jenny Chapman: The Minister is trying to be helpful in acknowledging our points, but I want to challenge him. He is arguing that trusts were not innovative, but they absolutely were. He talks about the Clink and other examples. There are always pockets of absolutely excellent practice that have amazing successes, but the challenge is mainstreaming that, and getting it out so that it is the norm and not the exception. This reform has made that more difficult. Rather than analysing where we are, I hope the Minister will move on to tell us where he intends to take us next.

Rory Stewart: That is a very good challenge, and I will move on to the question of the voluntary sector and how to take good small examples to a bigger scale.

The challenge is what on earth to do about that. How do we address the problems? The fundamental thing is to get back to the basics, which are exactly what

[Rory Stewart]

hon. Members in the Chamber have discussed. Basics include ensuring that people have a manageable case load, which means not going beyond 50 to 55 cases. They must meet the people in the cases regularly; they must ensure that they not only meet them but put in place a good assessment of the needs of the individual and of public protection; and they must come up with a plan linking that assessment to action. That is before we go on to the other things that we have been discussing, which is how we work with the voluntary sector and wider society. The basics need to happen first.

Around the country we can see that some people are delivering those basics well. Cumbria, for example, which has a CRC, has a good report from the inspectors for doing that. London, as the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge knows well, got a negative report from the inspectors exactly about some of those areas. We will not go into the details and explanations for some of that today. Some are about transition and inheriting a difficult situation, and London has always been difficult for probation services and has more than 30 different boroughs. There are complexities with IT systems and so on. However, we do not want to make excuses. The fundamental question is: can we sort those things out? I believe we can.

I am very confident that we can get to a situation, even in London, which is probably the most difficult area in the country, where we can have manageable case loads, where people can be met regularly, where there is good tracking of offenders—we know where they are and take good enforcement action if they do not turn up to appointments—and where the assessment and the plan are in place. I am very hopeful that, when the next inspection report comes out from the probation inspectorate, we will see those improvements even in London. I expect to be held accountable if those improvements are not recorded in the next report.

Liz Saville Roberts: I am interested in what the Minister is saying. Will he commit to ensure proper parliamentary scrutiny of how those organisations operate, whatever their name in future? That is not the case at present.

Rory Stewart: It would be interesting to know what kind of parliamentary scrutiny the hon. Lady means. There are some pretty good examples of scrutiny—the Justice Committee is doing a report on the probation service and we have an incredibly active, energetic and highly critical chief inspector of probation who is doing an enormously good job which is drawn on by everyone around the Chamber—but I am open to more. Debates such as this one are very powerful ways to hold us to account.

The next issue, as we move on from addressing the basics, is to look at some of the questions the hon. Member for Darlington talked about, in particular how we scale up pockets of really good small practice in individual local areas. That seems to be a huge challenge for everything—not just probation but everything we do with the voluntary sector. It is infuriating to find in most of our constituencies good local providers being pushed out either by contractors coming in from elsewhere or by large charities and voluntary sector organisations.

In my case, in Cumbria, they appear to come up from London with hundreds of proposal writers to take over a local council contract, but lack the local skills and knowledge to deliver.

We need to find ways to encourage CRCs to provide both the money that could go to those voluntary organisations—for example, in housing—and the cultural change, as the hon. Member for Darlington is aware, which is to encourage probation officers to let go of the cases to let specialist providers in mental health or housing take over their clients. That can be done but it must be driven through individual CRC by individual CRC. However, that is just the beginning. The big aim is to move from what happens with the individual in the probation office to what happens in broader society.

The real reason we have faced reoffending rates stubbornly stuck at 50% for nearly 40 years is that, in the end, the behaviour of someone coming out of prison is not controlled simply by what happens in the interaction with the probation officer or, when in prison, the prison officer. That is a very individual psychological engagement. What tends to happen is that the probation officer tries to change the behaviour of the individual in the room. However, that individual exists not only in the room but in a broader society. Unless such individuals can repair their relationships with family, society and the state, we will not get into a cycle in which they offend less or, eventually, do not offend at all.

That involves difficult things, with the individual feeling a sense of hope and agency; and that they can take control of their lives and have a sense of dignified participation, not as a labelled criminal but as a citizen in the fullest sense in society. No one in the Chamber has easy answers to how to achieve those things, but we must focus on ensuring that we get everything right, from the basics of meeting, assessment and planning, right through to the broader engagement with society to make that citizen function. We must recognise that the idea of desistance is not a linear path, but it is a path to reduce reoffending and protect the public.

I will conclude with three remarks. First, I pay tribute to the very hard work of probation officers. They are some of our most dedicated and serious professionals. Yesterday in Nottingham Prison I was lucky enough to see the Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Rutland CRC—people who have worked in probation trusts for nearly 30 years. They are based in the prison, telling very powerful stories about the assistance they provide in housing, and they represent exactly why we should be so proud of the work that probation officers do. They have difficult work which, as hon. Members have pointed out, combines the work of a social worker with that of someone who has to implement a court order and protect the public.

Secondly, I pay tribute to Members of Parliament. Their work in this area is often ignored by the public and, sometimes, too much ignored by Parliament. Such work matters deeply, as the hon. Member for Strangford pointed out, both for the individuals themselves on their journey towards improvement, and for the public.

Finally, I undertake to the House that we must focus. The results that we are getting from the inspectors are simply not good enough. I wish to be judged on driving the CRCs back to the very basics of their task, and on opening up to all the innovations and new ideas shared

around the Chamber, to ensure that 40 years of stubborn rates of reoffending begin to be addressed, for the sake of individual offenders and the public as a whole.

10.47 am

Ellie Reeves: I again put on the record my thanks for being able to have this important debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) said, this issue does not often get a lot of attention either inside or outside the House, so it is important that so many hon. Members have been in the Chamber to talk about it. We have had a good discussion about the precarious position in which our probation services find themselves.

As I said, the Justice Committee, of which I am a member, is considering all the issues. I look forward to speaking in Committee after this debate about what has been discussed and how we can take it forward.

I am grateful to hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. A number of my hon. Friends raised the individual cases of their constituents, and I am aware of the tragic case of Conner Marshall, which could have been avoided had the probation service acted on missed appointments. Those were missed opportunities, as the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) rightly pointed out. That underscores why action on probation services is needed so urgently—so that nothing like that happens again.

We have talked at length about staff, and I am glad that the Minister put on the record the tremendous work of probation staff, often in challenging circumstances under CRCs. We have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) experiences of probation workers in his constituency, and of those Unison members. Probation staff do a tremendous job. They are not in the profession for the money, but because they care. They need proper resources, and they need to be valued. They need to be able to help the people that they went into the profession

to help, and not just simply tick boxes to secure a profit for the CRC they work for. We will take that incredibly important point away from the debate.

It often feels like the voluntary sector is doing great work despite CRCs. In London, we have Clinks and a great charity called Switchback that does a huge amount of work with offenders, runs a café in east London and works with prisoners at the end of their sentences. More should be done to support them and to support innovation. CRCs have not been innovative. They have not done the work they ought to have been doing because they are ticking boxes. They are not there to be innovative, but to generate a profit, because they are private companies. That is where this has gone so incredibly wrong.

I am grateful for the Minister's points about MTC Novo, which is clearly failing at probation in London. On his comments about its latest inspection, I hope we will see an improvement. I am grateful that he has been willing to be accountable for what is in that report, which I will want to follow up.

It has become evident throughout the debate that CRCs in their current form are not fit for purpose. They have been part of an ideological move away from public services, which have been handed to the private sector. When they go wrong, rather than saying, "This has gone wrong. They need to come back into public ownership", they have been bailed out by the Government. It is not acceptable and it is ideologically driven. The CRCs need to go back into public control, so that we are left with a rehabilitation system that is fit for purpose, and that can reduce reoffending and keep the public safe and reassured. That is the main thing that we will take away from today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered private probation services.

10.52 am

Sitting suspended.

Scottish City Deals

11 am

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the progress of Scottish city deals.

As always, it is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. The Localism Act 2011 created the concept of core cities in the UK and granted significant devolved power over financial and planning matters to city regions that successfully negotiated deals with central Government. As the greatest city in the world, it was inevitable that Glasgow was the first city region in Scotland to successfully negotiate a city deal in 2014. I pay tribute to the city region's councillors—particularly the Labour councillors—who led the championing of that deal. Gordon Matheson, who was then leader of Glasgow City Council, and his colleagues played a vital role in ensuring that the deal was achieved, and it proved to be the harbinger of successful deals for Aberdeen, Inverness, Edinburgh and Stirling.

Glasgow's deal was agreed by the UK Government, the Scottish Government and the eight local authorities in Glasgow and the Clyde valley: East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Glasgow City, Inverclyde, North Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, South Lanarkshire and West Dunbartonshire. It aims ambitiously to support the creation of 29,000 jobs, underpinned by £1 billion of Scottish Government and UK Government capital funding and £3.3 billion of private sector investment to support a proposed infrastructure investment programme. The purported aims of the deal are based on three themes: a £1.1 billion fund to support 20 major infrastructure projects in the region, including reviving plans for the long-awaited rail link between the city centre and the airport; three labour market projects to address local employment challenges; and innovation and growth projects to support the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises and enhance the city's life sciences sector.

The city deal promises significant funds for Glasgow's development, but very little progress has been made since 2014. For example, more than three years after the deal was agreed, the plan for the Glasgow airport rail link, which was meant to be a key component of the deal, has yet to be agreed. I would like the UK Government to take this opportunity to explain to us Glaswegians why there has been such a significant lack of progress. That raises serious questions about the way in which the Scottish city deals, particularly the Glasgow city deal, were set up, how they are being run and where they will go next.

The Glasgow city deal has been extremely badly handled by the Governments at Westminster and Holyrood. Both the Tories and the Scottish National party need to be held to account for their failure to progress the deal, having so far failed even to agree on the outcomes they want it to deliver. The two Governments seem more focused on arguing about constitutional issues. The UK Government lack oversight of what the money they committed is being used for. Put simply, the Tories do not care enough about the deal to monitor it and press for progress.

The development of the Glasgow city deal and other Scottish city deals is evidently not a priority for the UK Government. That is fittingly exemplified by the fact

that no one from the Scotland Office, which I named in my application for the debate, bothered to turn up, and that the Minister for the northern powerhouse, which is a position designed for the north of England, was dispatched to respond instead. That begs the question: what is the Scotland Office actually doing beyond hosting the occasional *soirée* in Dover House? It has shown a lack of leadership on this vital growth opportunity for our cities in Scotland.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Before the hon. Gentleman was elected, the problem we had with getting Scotland Office Ministers to appear in this Chamber was that there was only one Government MP representing a Scottish constituency and the Secretary of State does not normally appear here. Given that he is now joined on the Government Benches by an illustrious array of talent from Scotland, is it not time that a Scotland Office Minister came to this Chamber?

Mr Sweeney: I thank my honourable colleague from the great city of Glasgow for that observant intervention. I welcome the fact that some Scottish Conservative Members are here. It is just a shame that none of them are deemed worthy of holding the position of Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, which, bizarrely, was given to someone who failed to be elected to the House and sits in the other place.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Sweeney: Perhaps you would like to bid for the job, sir.

Bill Grant: This is not a bid for the job, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. May I go back to what we knew as the GARL—the Glasgow airport rail link? The Strathclyde Partnership for Transport was heavily involved in that—in fact, the route was mapped out. Does he recall that that was shelved not by the SPT but by the Scottish Government?

Mr Sweeney: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. Since the UK Government provided half the capital for the city deal—cash that was contingent on a no vote in the 2015 referendum—it appears that the SNP Scottish Government are at best apathetic about the progress and success of the deal and are therefore dragging their feet and putting nationalism ahead of the national interest and of the interests of Glaswegians. There is no better example of that than the way in which power was ripped away from the SPT and centralised in Transport Scotland. There has been a total lack of progress in infrastructure investment in Glasgow, particularly in the Glasgow metro rail network, which was built by the Strathclyde region. There has been no substantial investment to expand the network since the end of the Strathclyde region and the centralisation of transport powers under Transport Scotland.

The Glasgow airport rail link was scrapped in 2008, and there was a fire sale of the land—a scorched earth policy—that would have allowed it to happen. We struggle to see how we can revive that deal, because all the infrastructure that was put in place to achieve it was sold off in that fire sale by John Swinney. There is also a threat to the Crossrail scheme in Glasgow, which is vital for unifying the city region's rail network. Transport

Scotland has actually demanded its removal from the city region plan, which would open up the land for the construction of housing.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I will avoid the theatrics that some others have used. The hon. Gentleman talks about the danger posed to Crossrail. Does he accept that, under a previous administration, Glasgow City Council granted permission for 800 houses where Crossrail would have gone? I do not think he is in strong territory.

Mr Sweeney: I do not accept that at all. The high street curve area was protected until June last year, after the change in administration. It was actually Transport Scotland—[*Interruption.*] No, the planning application was not before that. I am the only Member of Parliament who raised an objection to that planning application, which went to the city council only last month. Crossrail was enabled in the city region development plan, but it was removed from the latest edition of the plan in June last year at the demand of Transport Scotland. That is why a planning application went in that threatens the delivery of the Crossrail scheme, which is a vital project for Glasgow. I urge all Glasgow city region Members of Parliament to get behind it. We need to protect and safeguard the route for Crossrail. It is a critical project that should be funded by the Glasgow city region city deal, and it is another example of how dysfunctional and disjointed the whole administration of the deal has been.

At a time when public money is tight, it is unacceptable that the involvement of two Governments—in Edinburgh and London—can lead to a stalemate in the progress of the Glasgow city deal and a failure to draw up and implement a strategy for investing the allocated funds. The Tories and the SNP must get a grip if our urban areas are ever to catch up with and exceed the ambition of their English peers.

In an evaluation of their progress in 2016, the Fraser of Allander Institute commented that the three city deals that existed in Scotland at the time

“could have an important impact in increasing urban productivity, and increasing the culture of partnership and innovation in these...city regions,”

but “many more steps remain,” and that for cities in Scotland to move forward,

“they need to be empowered—with additional roles, funding and competencies, because they will need and are best-placed to identify their infrastructure investment requirements, especially in transport and housing.”

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): My constituency is not lucky enough to have a city deal yet—they are still under negotiation in Clackmannanshire and, in the form of the Tay cities deal, in Perth and Kinross. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that devolution does not mean separate? Edinburgh should pass more powers down to local authorities and work constructively with Westminster, so that we get more transparency about these deals and actually get the money to the communities where it is needed sooner rather than later.

Mr Sweeney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, which was timely because I am just about to address the question of municipalism in Scotland—a great tradition that is sadly diminished.

To achieve those recommendations by the Fraser of Allander Institute, we need substantially greater powers to act at municipal level, which the Glasgow city deal shows are sorely lacking. It is fair to say that Glasgow has been progressively smothered by the process of devolution in the past 20 years. Edinburgh holds too much power. It sucks up power from other parts of the country, including Glasgow. The SNP has only exacerbated the problem by drastically cutting funding to local government at twice the rate the Scottish budget has been reduced. Rebranding the city council as a city government is just dressing mutton up as lamb, because without any substantive changes to Glasgow's real political power it is nothing more than changing the letterhead on the city council stationery. We need to appraise honestly how devolution can better support our great cities towards more responsive, representative government, rather than increasingly concentrating power in Edinburgh.

The north of England has been invigorated by a multimillion pound investment and innovative development through its city deals. Historically Britain's second city, Glasgow is now at risk of losing out in terms of power and investment compared with other big, regional cities in the UK. City regions such as Manchester and Liverpool have made great gains in funding, voice and influence in recent years, including through the introduction of directly elected metro mayoralities. That greater devolution of power is to be celebrated, and Glasgow, which is bigger than each of those cities in northern England, needs to learn from the recent experience of cities such as Manchester to bring more power and investment to our great city. We need to ensure that Glasgow, as one of the greatest cities in the world, and once the fourth-largest city in Europe, has a greater and distinctive voice within the UK. We should be exploring all avenues for how we increase our political clout to improve the lives of Glaswegians.

The city deal appears to be a temporary fix to underlying structural issues for funding the Glasgow city region, which over recent decades has been both ravaged by a decade of SNP cuts and undermined by the Tory break-up of what it saw as a troublesome Labour-led Strathclyde regional council in the 1990s. I hope that the debate will force the Government to provide much-needed clarity on the future progress of the longest-standing Scottish city deal, the Glasgow and Clyde Valley city region deal.

The UK Government need to be proactive in pushing for progress while putting pressure on the SNP Government in Holyrood to deliver their commitments. As has been mentioned in interventions, we need to establish unity of purpose to ensure that the right projects are prioritised so that Glasgow finally gets the vital, world-class infrastructure it needs to thrive as a global destination in the 21st century, without further delay and procrastination. The current deal clearly shows that we cannot trust the UK Government to deliver on their financial commitments, we cannot trust the Scotland Office to show leadership, and we cannot trust the Scottish Government to implement their commitments properly.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Is that not proof that the deal was not fully thought-through by the UK Government at the start? Instead,

it was a pre-referendum bribe, with them throwing out the money without laying out what the outcomes were going to be.

Mr Sweeney: I do not accept that it was done in that manner, cynically put as it was. I think it was put together with the best of intentions, but it has been managed incompetently. Both Parliaments and both Governments are to blame for the lack of oversight. I hope that both Parliaments will rediscover a spirit of co-operation on this issue and reappraise and reboot the city deal to ensure that we get the best effect for the people of Glasgow. I have been elected to do that, and I am going to ensure that that happens.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is a good friend of mine, and I understand that, as the sole Labour MP in Glasgow—on a wafer-thin majority—he has a job to do. The SNP has been in administration in Glasgow for less than 12 months, while his party presided over the deal for three years. Is there no responsibility on the part of his colleagues in Glasgow city chambers?

Mr Sweeney: Glasgow City Council has been pressing valiantly to deliver projects such as the Glasgow airport rail link, but it has been thwarted at every turn by Transport Scotland. Why? Because municipal power has been progressively ripped out of city councils across Scotland by the Scottish Government. *[Interruption.]* It happened in 2008, when SPT was denuded of any executive transport planning powers. It has the capacity to do it.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. It is great to have so much enthusiasm in the room, but I remind Members that any comments should be made through the Chair.

Mr Sweeney: Thank you, Ms McDonagh. I shall conclude by putting two direct questions to the Minister. What will he do to ensure that city deals in Scotland are properly delivered and to ensure the deals bring the hoped-for benefits to the city regions? What discussion has he had with the Scottish Government about enhancing the Glasgow city region's political power in concert with the city deal, as has happened in other UK cities to their benefit? Will he show us some of the leadership lacking in the Scotland Office by committing to raise those issues with the Scottish Government without delay?

11.14 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): It is a pleasure to serve under your leadership, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) on securing this hugely important debate. The Government welcome the opportunity to talk about the huge success that Scotland's city deals are already delivering for all seven of the major cities in Scotland, and will deliver in future.

I am slightly disappointed that the hon. Gentleman is so upset that I am responding to the debate. I am the Minister for the northern powerhouse—for most people in the Chamber, I guess that is the far-southern powerhouse—but I am also Minister for local growth, and it is my cities and local growth team, on behalf of

the Government, in partnership with the Secretary of State for Scotland and his civil servants, who have negotiated many of these city deals. I hope today to bring to the debate not just the experience we have had in government of negotiating city deals in Scotland but other experience.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the huge success of the English city devolution programme. We have seen huge steps forward in places such as the West Midlands, which now has a Mayor for its combined authority, as well as Liverpool and Manchester—and, in particular, the Tees Valley. There are important lessons we can learn across our United Kingdom, both from this debate and, more generally, about how devolution—taking real power, money and influence away from Westminster and returning it to the hands of people in local communities to drive forward their own growth—can transform our economy.

Before I get to the main part of the debate, I want to put on record my congratulations to Scotland's rugby team, who absolutely battered England at Murrayfield on Saturday. I was there, and it was a great privilege. It was not a great result from my point of view, but it was good to be at the match. It shows that sometimes the best team wins, and the team with the best spirit also wins. I therefore congratulate Scotland on winning back the Calcutta cup—after 10 years.

I would like to celebrate the achievements and successes we have seen in our city deals. An additional £1 billion of UK Government investment and funding is going into local growth priorities in Scotland, which has been matched by £1 billion put forward by the Scottish Government, with additional investment from local authorities, universities and—let us not forget it, because it has not yet been mentioned in the debate—the private sector, which together brought forward a further £835 million. That shows that when city deals, and devolution and growth deals, are at their most successful, they are a partnership of equals between the UK Government, the Scottish Government, Scottish local authorities, the private sector and, of course, our colleagues in the public sector.

As we set out in our industrial strategy White Paper last November, the Government are committed to driving forward growth across the whole of the United Kingdom. It is about helping areas to achieve their full potential by building on local sector strengths that attract investment and supporting local businesses to grow. The city and growth deals that we have already negotiated and those that we have committed to negotiate in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are absolutely central to that ambition. Moreover, they show how the Government can work hand in hand with partners in the devolved Administrations across our United Kingdom and local authorities to deliver, in a co-ordinated way, real impacts for local economies.

The first Scottish city deal was agreed in 2014, three years after the then coalition Government launched the first groundbreaking English city deal. It was interesting to hear it referred to as a pre-referendum bribe. If SNP Members believe that—I do not believe it; the deal was about driving forward the city of Glasgow's economy for the people who live there—I wonder why they signed up to it. Perhaps they can deal with that later.

The deals provide place-based solutions, building on local expertise to co-ordinate investment and policy, and interventions to help to drive economic growth.

Recognising that city deals, as piloted in England, could boost local economies across our United Kingdom, Her Majesty's Government and the Scottish Government agreed that the programme should be extended beyond England, to demonstrate our commitment to supporting dynamic businesses and local communities represented by devolved Administrations. We have agreed four deals across Scotland and are negotiating three more, meaning that we now have deals being either implemented or negotiated for each of Scotland's great seven cities. We are also working on a cross-border deal between Scotland and England, referred to as the borderlands deal, which was confirmed in the most recent Budget, to see how we can drive forward the ambitions and desires of businesses in the borderlands area of our United Kingdom.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): There has been a lot of talk specifically about city deals. On the Tay cities deal, which comes into my constituency, I just wanted to confirm that we will use as much pressure as possible to ensure that the deals cascade out into rural economies as well, because they need just as much support.

Jake Berry: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. We should never forget that the majority of people in this country do not live in a city, but in towns, villages and rural communities. Therefore, every city deal and every growth deal that the Government negotiate, regardless of where it may be in our United Kingdom, has to be about driving forward the economies of areas outside cities as well as in cities. I happily confirm that the hopes and desires of her constituents who do not live in a city will be part of that deal.

Alan Brown: The Minister touched on the borderlands growth deal. He will know where I am going with this: the Ayrshire growth deal was on the table before the borderlands growth deal, which now seems to be going forward. At the last Housing, Communities and Local Government questions he committed to meeting the backers of the Ayrshire growth deal. Has he progressed that meeting yet?

Jake Berry: We are in conversations about dates that work. I have already met with the representatives of the Ayrshire growth deal. As I committed to in the Chamber following the hon. Gentleman's question, I am happy to meet with them again to discuss what we can take forward and how we can work together on proposals that they may have for an Ayrshire growth deal. I will keep him informed about my diary, but I hope that he will not have to wait too long for the second meeting. I know that discussions are ongoing with my colleagues in the Scotland Office.

An important aspect of all the city deals is that their content cannot be imposed top-down by the UK Government or the devolved Administration. They need to be promoted by local partners and draw on the expertise in the local communities, because such deals work best where they are ground-up and locally driven.

I turn to the achievements of some of the city deals that we have already agreed. The Glasgow and Clyde Valley deal was the first Scottish deal agreed, and included a joint £1 billion investment fund from both the UK and the Scottish Governments to support growth across the city region through a regionally controlled investment fund. Good progress continues to be made, with a number of key milestones already achieved.

Significant funding—£209 million—has been approved, and many projects have been successfully completed. One example is the positive investment—some £89.3 million—of city deal funding to deliver the canal and north element of the Sighthill regeneration project, which is one of the biggest of its type outside London. I could not put the difference that the project will make better than the hon. Member for Glasgow North East. In one of his recent tweets, he said that the Sighthill regeneration project is

“an incredible legacy for my constituency.”

Mr Sweeney: I accept that the Sighthill transformational regeneration area is a wonderful example of the city deal in action, but my point was that, given the lack of political power compared with the powers given to other city regions in the UK, we cannot progress critical infrastructure projects such as transport because those powers are no longer in the locus of the city region. Only when we have the powers to match the investment will we see real progress in areas such as infrastructure. Does the Minister not accept that we are seeing a lack of progress in those areas?

Jake Berry: I do not accept that the only point that the hon. Gentleman is seeking to make is that the region wants further political powers. He set out that there had been a lack of progress in the Glasgow city deal. I have pointed out a project that he himself has said will be “an incredible legacy for my constituency.”

Some £89.3 million has already been drawn down into that project. That ably makes the point that the city deal is making progress, and shows the commitment of both the UK and Scottish Governments to driving forward the economy of Glasgow.

The city deal investment in the Sighthill regeneration project, which the hon. Gentleman acknowledges is a good legacy for his constituency, will fund connections between that area and the city centre. It will provide a significant economic boost to north Glasgow. In addition to the regionally managed investment fund, as part of the Glasgow city deal the Government have committed funding to specific innovation projects across the city region. Those projects have already begun to support small and medium-sized businesses with high-growth potential as part of our strategy to back Glasgow's life sciences sector.

Among those projects is the world-leading Imaging Centre of Excellence, which is part of a £64 million investment in stratified medicine at the new south Glasgow hospitals campus. Again, that part of the city deal is drawn-down, completed and open, showing that the city deal is already delivering for the people of Glasgow. It is a unique medical research facility, which will translate science into economic and patient benefits for the city of Glasgow, Scotland and the UK. The project will bring 396 new high-skilled, high-wage, high-value jobs to the city region over a seven-year period, and an independent assessor believes that it will contribute at least £88 million to the local economy—another demonstration of how the city deal in Glasgow is already delivering for people on the ground.

On the comment made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North East about the delay to the rail link with the airport, I share his disappointment that the Scottish Government have failed to make proper progress

[*Jake Berry*]

on that. It is already fully funded from the city deal agreed gainshare fund. The money is available and ready to be drawn down. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will take the message from today's debate that there is certainly ambition from the UK Government, who are calling for the project, in partnership with Transport Scotland, to be brought forward as quickly as possible to deliver not just for the people of Glasgow, but for the wider Scottish region.

I note that the transport woes in the city of Glasgow are not isolated. Trains between Edinburgh and Glasgow have been both reduced in frequency and halved in their length, because the lease is about to run out on the diesel trains that currently ply that line. I wonder whether one solution could be to take the steam train from the Bo'ness and Kinneil line to supplement the transport between Glasgow and Edinburgh. That should not be a solution that any of us want, but given the incompetence with which the Scottish Government seem to be managing that line, it may be the only one available.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): On the subject of transport, the £120 million investment in the city bypass in my constituency of Midlothian is welcome, but does the Minister agree that it must be a priority, as the majority of people working in Edinburgh are now living in Midlothian—the fastest-growing constituency in Scotland?

Jake Berry: The hon. Lady makes a good point on behalf of her constituents, and I am sure that she will continue to drive that argument here in Westminster in representing them.

We have built on the success of the Glasgow deal. In 2016, we agreed a deal for both Aberdeen and Inverness. In Aberdeen, we now have the £180 million Oil and Gas Technology Centre—an industry-leading research and knowledge organisation, which is fast establishing its reputation.

David Linden: Does the Minister accept that the Aberdeen and shire city deal actually fell £254 million short on the UK Government side, compared with the Scottish Government side, and can he explain why the estimates document shows that £72 million is being surrendered to Her Majesty's Treasury?

Jake Berry: On the subject of Aberdeen, I would have thought the hon. Gentleman would be celebrating the fact that the centre has invested in more than 70 projects in just 12 months to develop technology that could transform the North sea. I think it shows that we cannot cover the success of Scottish city deals in a half-hour debate. Perhaps there will be an opportunity to have another debate to cover Aberdeen, Inverness and other areas.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

UK Fisheries Policy

[*MR IAN PAISLEY in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered future UK fisheries policy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley.

I am sure right hon. and hon. Members know that the demise of our fishing industry under European Union membership was frequently discussed in the lead-up to the referendum in June 2016. Leaving the EU is a huge opportunity for UK fishing and for our fishermen, who need a positive vision of what can be achieved as a wholly sovereign nation. As we continue to debate and discuss what types of agreements and frameworks we should put in place for access to trade, we should not forget one of the easiest wins we can have from this whole process: taking back control of our fishing waters and handing them back to UK fishermen.

I commend the Minister, who gave great support to farmers and fishermen leading up to the referendum and continues to show diligent support to the fishing and farming communities. It is great to see the environment leading the way in Parliament and in the media, and I know the Minister will be fighting the corner for farmers and fishermen over at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, alongside the Secretary of State. I also know that he is currently working toward a new fisheries policy to be published in the next few months, and I hope that the contributions from right hon. and hon. Members today will help to shape that debate.

Brexit and fisheries in general should be considered in two phases: the implementation period and the end state. I will put on record my concerns about how an implementation or transition period could harm fishermen if not done correctly. Ideally, at 11 pm on 29 March 2019, we need to have absolute and 100% control of our fisheries, without it being part of any implementation or transition deal. If not, we could lock ourselves into future EU treaties and regulations, including the discard ban, which could see many of the boats that currently work in the UK going bankrupt.

One of the hardest things to see, as a member of the public, is dead fish being thrown back into the ocean due to a dysfunctional and rigid EU quota-based system. The discard ban could have huge ramifications for our fisheries. If, however, the Government enter into a transitional or implementation period that includes fisheries, there must be a clear and final termination clause so that the UK fishing fleet is not part of any EU treaty or regulation. We cannot be in a situation where we leave the EU for a few seconds and then join through the back door. I urge the Minister to stress those points to the Department for Exiting the European Union to ensure that fisheries are protected and treated separately.

On future fisheries policy, we need a system that no longer means our fishermen throwing tonnes of fish back into our oceans and our fishing fleet restricted by arbitrary quotas. We need a system based on sound science, and one which effectively monitors how many fish are being caught.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that any future fisheries policy must have buy-in from experts who work in the industry? Even I would not dictate to fishermen how the stocks should be managed. The fishermen themselves know best, and they should have input into a management system.

Scott Mann: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I am sure she agrees that we need to look at the science, Government legislation and the industry. A holistic approach must be taken to ensure that our fishing industry is protected.

As I said, we need a system based on sound science, and one that effectively monitors how many fish are being caught, where they are being caught and what is being caught, so we can get an up-to-date and clear picture of the state of the current fishery and the health of the fish stocks within it. Throwing fish back into the sea gives distorted information and it is not good for conservation or for public perception. Only by landing everything we catch can we properly monitor our fisheries and implement appropriate fisheries measures to preserve stocks.

I know the Minister is aware of the work currently being undertaken by Fishing for Leave, the organisation that has set up a new fisheries model. I have met with the group recently, and it has shown me its proposals for an effort control system and a hybrid system. The organisation has modelled it, and it shows the principles of a time-at-sea model and a quota-based system. I will briefly explain what that means.

A time-at-sea model is already in place in places such as the Faroe Islands, but I do not believe we should look to replicate that exact model because a time-at-sea model generally allows for a race to the fish. Vessels therefore target the most valuable species closer to shore. Under Fishing for Leave's proposals, we could have a system whereby fishermen were allocated an amount of net soak time over the course of a year and would be allowed a flexible catch composition quota target, which would stipulate how many of a specific species they should aim to catch as a percentage of their overall catch.

The clever part of that model is that the skipper, if he exceeds his catch limit, will have time at sea reduced equivalent to the value of the wrong species being caught. It is almost a reverse compensation measure—the skipper will not want to lose much time at sea, so it will be an incentive for him to go out and catch the species he wants to target. If after a couple of days at sea the skipper has exhausted his weekly allocation of hours used as time to compensate for that particular species, he will be on shore and losing time, and less fishing effort will be exerted on the overall fishery. That means that he will be able to land a nice, profitable catch of fish, spend more time at home with his family and to incur lower diesel and fuel costs at sea, and that the scientists will have lots of reliable data on which to base their information.

Under the current quota system, a boat could be out to sea for a number of days, trying to target a specific species and throwing away many dead fish of the wrong species. Further to that, under the proposed EU discard ban, a vessel would have to tie up after it exhausted the smallest quota number. Seafish modelling has shown

that 60% of the UK's fishing fleet would go bankrupt if we continued to enforce quotas while also enforcing a discard ban.

The Fishing for Leave model avoids the need for a discard ban and the risks that that would pose to fishermen. It also proposes countermeasures to ensure that some species are protected. By landing everything that is caught and monitoring where the boat is, we can harvest live data and know what is being caught and where. That will allow fishing authorities to determine accurately which species they need to protect or which areas need to be closed. When a boat goes to sea, it will have not only allocations of time and flexible catch composition quotas with catch limit sizes, but live data streaming telling it where it can fish, which species can be targeted and which authorities are responsible for developing those targets.

Of course, to make a time-at-sea model work, there must be a level playing field so that fishermen are measured by how long their nets are in the water. Within the model, that is known as net soak time. I know my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) introduced a days-at-sea model when it was trialled previously. I believe that that model was flawed because it did not include the net soak time data, so we were not able to see that boats were targeting species close to the shore rather than those species they were supposed to be going for.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Is not one of the big wins from this excellent scheme that we will not only land and eat more fish and have more output, but catch far fewer fish? That is great for the fish as well as for the fishermen and the fish-eaters.

Scott Mann: I will come on to that point as I get through the rest of my speech—my right hon. Friend has pre-empted one of my thought processes.

Not only will boats not overfish inshore, as has happened in the Faroe Islands, but it will also bring another significant point to fruition: the days-at-sea proposal tended to lead to the targeting of fish within estuaries. We have seen significant pressure on our estuarine species. There is a much wider point here about estuaries and the ecosystems that exist within them.

I congratulate the Cornwall Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority on implementing a netting ban in a protected area in Cornwall to try to protect some of the species there. People target fish inshore because they face so much competition for the fish in the offshore reaches—they may not have negotiated as much of a quota as they think they are entitled to.

Under the time-at-sea model, all nets would have net soak time sensors, which would measure how long nets are in the water. As soon as the nets are deployed, the sensor would kick in and an on-board computer would start measuring how long the net is in the water for. That would allow fishermen to travel to their desired location without having their time deducted. I understand that the Secretary of State saw that technology on a recent visit to North Shields. When a haul is brought back on board, the crew can record every fish that is caught, and provide live accurate data for the authorities to calculate what the fishery looks like, creating a picture of stock sizes, species, maturity and sustainable yield.

[*Scott Mann*]

Currently, under the common fisheries policy, thousands of tonnes of fish are thrown back into the water. That means wasted time, effort and cost for crews, millions of dead fish not being put to market, and less data for scientists and authorities. If we implement the model, I believe it can only be good for our fishery. Fishermen would hit the targets that they need to be viable, because they will be able to land everything they have caught. Meanwhile, the total number of fish being caught would be lower, because we would not be in a situation in which millions of fish are caught, killed and thrown back as fishermen pursue species for which they have not hit their quota.

I want us to conserve stocks and maintain a healthy and diverse fishery. This hybrid model can achieve that. I urge the Minister and his officials to meet Fishing for Leave to look at its model and the website it has built, which shows the process of how a fisherman can record catches and work within the current system. That said, it should not be the only fisheries management tool we should be looking at—we should look at different models that could be appropriate to determine what is in Britain's best interests as we fish our own waters again. Further to that, I urge the Minister to consider holding trials so he can pit all the models against each other. That would give a much better picture of the models, and we could see which was preferred and how it needed to be adapted to meet our needs.

That leads me on to how we can revitalise our fishing industry. This is a much wider point. As we travel around the UK, we see many former fishing communities, and we see at first hand the damage done by the common fisheries policy. I believe that the UK economy has been unbalanced for years. Globalisation has benefited urban areas, but that wealth rarely trickled down to rural coastal communities. That disparity was highlighted by the referendum result, but we now have an opportunity to rebalance UK plc. Through an effective fisheries policy, we can create jobs, increase productivity in coastal communities and bring life back to some of the coastal towns that have suffered.

It is also important that we consider the effects of post-Brexit trade deals on our fishing industry. At the moment, up to 60% of the fish caught in UK waters are exported to EU countries and further afield. I should imagine that the Department for Exiting the European Union and the Department for International Trade, which will oversee the future terms of our trade in fish, will look at this important policy and take into account how the industry exports.

It is right that we have a period of time and a policy in place that accommodates foreign boats in British waters and, likewise, British boats in European waters. In the spirit of co-operation with Europe, we should not want to shut the door on them immediately, but we should reach some sort of agreement where all our catches are landed through the UK.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that the Department starts to plan now for the fisheries protection part of the regaining of our waters, and creates that level of support and robustness in future, so that fishermen can have confidence that the UK will be able to support the final position?

Scott Mann: I absolutely agree on enforcement. I am sure the Minister listened to that and will respond in his own way. I understand that we have not been particularly good at enforcing our own fishery. Our fishermen need that confidence to move forward.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): On that point, some very large trawlers make their way into the Irish sea. They start at the very southern tip of the Irish sea and work their way right up. They are not necessarily from Great Britain—I am talking about the Spanish trawlers that come in and lift everything out of the sea in that area, leaving absolutely nothing after they have left. They can trawl right up to the beaches. We need protection zones within this policy.

Scott Mann: I absolutely agree with that, too. The hon. Gentleman very well sums up the conversations that I have with my fishermen, who also feel the pressure from foreign boats off the 12-mile zone.

It is important to me that, when Britain takes control of its waters, it sets its own terms of access. We want our fishermen to be confident that, in post-Brexit Britain, we will have control of our territorial waters and that we will be able to export our fish to European countries and further afield without tariffs. If we leave the EU without a trade deal and are under World Trade Organisation rules, the tariffs for exporting seafood to the EU generally range from 0% to 24%. Both fresh cod and prawns currently attract a 12% tariff. For European economic area countries such as Norway, cod has a zero tariff, while prawns have a 12% tariff.

If we get a free trade deal, tariff barriers will not be a problem. I would certainly welcome that. On the other hand, we may face a situation in which the EU will settle for zero tariffs only if we give it some access to British waters. That question will need to be considered very carefully by the Minister and the fishing industry in general.

There is a disparity between the amount of fish we import and the amount we export. We currently export a staggering amount of fish and shellfish that could perfectly well be eaten within the UK. Approximately 52% of the seafood that enters the UK supply chain is imported from abroad or is landed by foreign boats. For example, nearly all spider crabs caught off the Cornish coastline are currently exported to Europe, with fishermen exporting 98% of all the crabs we catch. I want to know what is wrong with those crabs. Brown crabs are a fantastic species to eat, and we should celebrate the spider crab, which is a fantastic-tasting species—many restaurants in France regularly serve spider crabs. Likewise, we catch a fantastic collection of cuttlefish that is also exported. We must continue to import and export to serve demand from Europe, but there is certainly a case to be made for more British-caught produce.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Has the hon. Gentleman considered the problem of non-tariff barriers? I sit on the Exiting the European Union Committee. We were in Brussels last week, and the Norwegian ambassador was very keen to impress upon us that one main reason why Norway is in the single market is to avoid non-tariff barriers on its fish exports.

Scott Mann: I take that point. Tariffs need to be looked at within the context of our Brexit policies right across the board, rather than just for fishing or agriculture.

If it is ultimately the case that the EU imposes tariffs on our seafood, there is an argument for Britain to become much more self-sustaining. We need to broaden our range and knowledge of seafood and encourage its consumption. I therefore urge the Minister to consider drawing up a strategy, either within a future fisheries policy or a separate policy, on how to encourage more British people to embrace seafood and try the different ranges of fish and shellfish that are caught on their doorstep.

The Minister is aware of the practice of electric pulse fishing, which is undertaken by Dutch trawlers. Given the likely negative impact that it is having on our fishery and our ecosystem, will he assure me that, under a future British fisheries policy, electric pulse fishing will be completely banned?

Taking back control of our fisheries was a huge issue during the referendum, but it has since taken a back seat. I hope we can put it back in the spotlight. The 29 March 2019 deadline is fast approaching, and we need a system that is ready to go. We need to be out of the common fisheries policy and out from under the auspices of the EU.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his excellent speech. One issue that the fishing community are very concerned about is the continued use of European boats in our waters if it is not made absolutely clear when we leave that we have our fishing waters back. I believe there is a continued-use element whereby they could claim that they were still allowed to fish here. Perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister could inform us, or perhaps my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) knows, how far that part of the negotiations has got and how clear it is that when we leave, we get our fishing waters back.

Scott Mann: My understanding is that, once we leave, we fall back on the UN convention on the law of the sea, which means that we control our 200-mile territorial zone, but I would refer that question to the Minister to be answered in full. As we leave the common fisheries policy and the auspices of the EU, we should have 100% control of our waters, with our own fishing system in place that better serves our fishermen and is fairer to our fishery.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Order. I intend to call the first Opposition spokesman no later than 3.25 pm. With that in mind, I will not set a formal time limit yet, because you are all such good and obedient Members that you will keep your comments, I hope, to just below four minutes. I call Mr Jim Shannon.

2.51 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate under your authority, Mr Paisley. I did not expect to be called first. I was hoping for more than four minutes, but that is by the bye; I will work to your guidelines.

I thank the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) for initiating the debate and giving this chance to those of us who represent constituencies where fishing is important. I know that every fifth word in this place seems to be “Brexit”. That term was unknown five years ago, but now the very state of the UK depends on the success of Brexit and the negotiating team. That is one job that I would not want to have, and I thank those who are so diligently putting in the work to make the exit from the EU as smooth and rewarding as possible. I look forward to the Minister’s contribution today. I know that it will be very positive, as it always is. Who would have thought when we joined what was purported to be no more than a trade and customs group that we would be in this position today? The lesson is clear: sovereignty is easy to let slip through our fingers, but infinitely harder to regain.

One of the industries that have been worst affected by a biased Europe is fishing. I had in my area a tremendous working fishing village in Portavogie, with two fish-producing factories and 120 boats. That is now down to 70. Why did that happen? Because of the European bureaucracy imposing quotas and days at sea—all the things that made fishing not work. At the same time, the Irish sea abounds with cod, yet all the scientists in Brussels, who never get off a warm seat, have the audacity to tell us that there is no cod there when there clearly is. The people who know that are the people who fish the sea. There are, therefore, very big issues to address.

When the nation voted to leave, the fishermen rejoiced. Indeed, every man, woman and unborn child in Portavogie voted to leave, because there was no doubt that that was what they wanted to happen. Nobody in Portavogie wanted to stay in Europe, and my constituency clearly reflected that opinion because a majority voted to leave. Our seas will be ours again. We will be able to thrive. We can pass our trade on to our families. We can hire the wonderful Filipino fishermen, who so greatly enhance our crews with their skill, dedication and commitment to our community, without the impossible red tape that forces us to take on European workers who do not have the same skill set or mindset. We can sell our products to our people at decent, affordable prices, which will benefit the restaurants and the consumers alike. However, the March 2019 deadline is striding towards us, and as yet our fishermen have none of the certainty that they crave and, indeed, deserve. Again, we look to the Minister for some confirmation in that regard.

I, along with many others in the Chamber, have seen the letter sent to the Prime Minister by the Cornish Fish Producers Organisation. The letter clearly outlines the needs of the fishing community and the villages and towns that rely on that community. It is crystal clear about the need for an immediate red line around our waters and the ability for fishermen to be just that: men who fish, and women who fish, without being used as political pawns. I for one do not see the families of Portavogie and surrounding areas or the families of Kilkeel or Ardglass as expendable. I see them as people who voted to leave, along with the majority of the United Kingdom, and who therefore deserve to leave at the same time as everyone else, in March 2019. No one has been fooled by the most recent Brussels fishing convention, which saw our quota increase, just in the

[Jim Shannon]

last year. The fact is that Europe puts the true Europeans first. We are leaving and we are looking forward to the day when we do just that.

I am standing in this Chamber today to say that we cannot give a sop to the Europeans. For too long, they have controlled British waters with anti-British policies. That must end in March 2019. Would that it could end in March 2018. Boy, that would be an even bigger day. The cries of joy and relief would be heard from the most easterly port of Ballyhalbert right across the Irish sea to the coast of Scotland, where the Scottish nationalists would also want to take note of the message that was coming through very clearly. Their fishing communities would be echoing those cries.

Fishing is not a sop; it has been the lifeblood of coastal communities and other, supplementary industries and it has the potential to be so again. We must extricate ourselves from the EU muddle and do what is right. Leave means leave now, and that is exactly what we are demanding of the Minister.

2.55 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): There is growing concern among the members of the fishing community in west Cornwall, including the Cornish Fish Producers Organisation, about the terms of the UK Government's proposed implementation period for Brexit and the potentially disastrous implications for the fishing industry. That is why I give particular credit to my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) for securing such a timely debate for our fishing industry. We never seem to have enough time to discuss this very important subject.

It is imperative that the UK Government confirm and demonstrate their commitment to leaving the common fisheries policy, and that commitment can be clearly demonstrated only by ensuring that fishing is not part of any transition or implementation deal and by the UK taking full responsibility for British waters on 29 March 2019. The entire UK fishing industry and its many supporters would consider a failure by the UK immediately to assert control of UK waters and manage fisheries as an independent coastal state extremely damaging. It would certainly be unacceptable to the Cornish fishermen I know and meet regularly.

It is clear that it would be a complete disaster for the UK to hand responsibility for its waters straight back to Brussels at the point of Brexit. In fact, it would be worse than an extension of the status quo, because we would be powerless to prevent French, Belgian, Dutch and other EU fleets from continuing to operate in UK waters and catch the fisheries resource there, under rules that they had decided without the UK having any say at all. The sector has been consistent and unambiguous in its expectation that full control over access to UK waters and management of our fisheries as an independent coastal state genuinely begins from March 2019, when we withdraw from the EU and CFP. An implementation period may make sense for some business sectors, but for the fisheries sector it would be disastrous.

The Cornish Fish Producers Organisation has set out a number of real and important reasons why fishing should not be part of a transition or implementation

deal with the EU. I am sure that many hon. Members in the Chamber are aware of the things that the organisation has said. Logically, fisheries jurisdiction, access rights and quota shares should be dealt with separately from trade arrangements when the UK's legal status in relation to fisheries changes on 29 March 2019. Norway, for example, maintains access to the EU single market under specific agreed arrangements, but it manages the fisheries within its own exclusive economic zone and enters into annual agreements on the management of shared stocks and quota exchanges as an independent coastal state. It is patently obvious that once the principle of the status quo on quota shares and access has been conceded for a transitional deal, the EU will use the same tactics and leverage when the UK seeks to negotiate a long-term trade deal with the EU. Fishing will again be a sacrificed pawn, irrespective of our legal status as an independent coastal state.

At the point at which the UK leaves the EU, in March 2019, UK Ministers and officials will no longer be party to decisions within any of the European institutions, including those that set quotas and make other rules on EU fisheries. It is an extreme understatement to say that it would be completely prejudicial to the interests of the UK fishing industry to tie us into fisheries management decisions in which we in the UK are mere rule takers. As an independent coastal state, the UK would be expected to take its seat in international fisheries negotiations, including those with Norway, other coastal states and the EU. Even the European Commission recognises that separate, bespoke arrangements will be required to include the UK in the decisions when setting total allowable catches in the annual year-end negotiations.

There is no legal or fisheries management reason why the UK should accept any precondition or artificial constraint on its right to negotiate the best deal that it can, including on access arrangements and quota share. I accept that a one-off, stand-alone arrangement for fishing in 2019 might be necessary, given that the UK leaves a quarter of the way through the fishing year, but it is essential that we leave the CFP this time early next year.

2.59 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on securing this debate. It is an all too infrequent opportunity to discuss the health of our fishing industry.

This is a moment of great significance for our fishing communities. For decades the operation of the common fisheries policy has been centralised, bureaucratic and unresponsive. We now have the opportunity to do things better. Other hon. Members have spoken about what will happen at the point of departure from the European Union—29 March 2019. It is a matter on which I have questioned the Prime Minister twice and I have had a somewhat less than unambiguous answer. Will the Minister make clear what is going to happen? Other hon. Members have suggested that 29 March will be the end of it and we will be completely out of the common fisheries policy. The position of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation is that, having signed up to a year's arrangements in December 2018, we would then honour those for the

remainder of that period, which they call a bridging period, from March until December. That would offer the industry some of the certainty and smooth regulation that it craves.

It has to be clearly understood at the very heart of Government that any arrangement that would mean that UK fisherman continued to be bound by quota or total allowable catch arrangements made at the December Agriculture and Fisheries Council, which they had not been part of, would be totally unacceptable. We need to hear that from the Minister today. We need to hear it in the clearest possible terms.

I would like to hear the Minister's view on the constitutional framework that is in place under the devolution settlement. Decisions currently made on fisheries management in Europe should, for my fishermen in Shetland and Orkney, be made in Edinburgh. That is the constitutional framework that comes from the various Scotland Acts. There is no good reason why we should anticipate anything different.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall spoke about the possibility of moving to an effort control system—a mixed quota and effort control system based on days at sea. These are all interesting ideas worthy of consideration. A move away from the quota system would be immensely problematic for the fishermen in my constituency and, I suspect, for those represented by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid). Many in the Scottish fleet have invested hundreds millions of pounds over the years in relation to the quota system. If there is to be any change, it has to be made with consummate care.

We can have any system in the world that we want, but it will fail if it does not do two things: first, if it does not have the co-operation and confidence of the fishing industry itself; secondly, if it does not operate on the basis of science that is properly reflective of the stocks that are in the sea. One of the big failings of the common fisheries policy in recent years is a growing divergence between scientists and fishermen, because much of the data that are used in making quota and total allowable catch decisions is two years old by the time that it is implemented. There has to be some quick and dirty way that that data can be analysed and used much more effectively to inform decision making. There is a great deal more that I would like to say, but time is not on my side. The important questions are already with the Minister. I look forward to hearing his answers.

3.4 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on securing this debate.

Lowestoft in my constituency was previously the fishing capital of the southern North sea; today it is a pale shadow of its former self. Brexit provides an opportunity to revitalise fishing off the East Anglian coast, and to maximise the economic and social benefits that the industry can bring to local communities and businesses in ports such as Lowestoft. I shall briefly outline the three ingredients required to bring about this renaissance, for which the forthcoming fisheries Bill must provide.

First, East Anglian fisherman must be given the opportunity to catch more fish. The region's catch sector predominantly comprises the inshore fleet which,

as has been well documented, does not get a fair slice of the cake. Moreover, we suffer from the worst excesses of the flagship debacle, with six vessels of the Lowestoft Fish Producers Organisation never coming near the port and landing their catches in the Netherlands and in Peterhead.

If the quota system is to continue, we need a radical reallocation in favour of locally based fisherman, so that they can earn a fair living and the full benefit of their hard work, often carried out in extremely harsh conditions, can be secured for the ports and communities in which they live and work. Secondly, going hand in hand with landing more fish in East Anglian ports, we need to invest in the infrastructure, skills and supply-chain businesses in those ports and the surrounding areas. While in many respects it is surprising how much of this supporting sector remains in Lowestoft and other East Anglian ports, my concern is that it does not have the capacity to cope with a significant increase in landing. The European Maritime and Fisheries Fund runs until 2020. Beyond that date it is necessary for the Government to assess the likely needs of the industry on a regional basis, then make the necessary funds available for a wide range of projects.

The research work to establish what is needed in East Anglia is now under way. The level of funding should at least match the current EU structural funds for fishing. It represents a good investment in UK plc. It will secure a good deal for coastal communities, providing a more diverse and secure economic base. It will help to rebalance the national economy in favour of areas that have suffered a great deal in recent decades. Finally, it is necessary to put in place a management system that has the full confidence and respect of all those working in the industry. This system must be based on science and it should be local, sustainable and collaborative.

In conclusion, we have a great opportunity to revitalise a uniquely British industry for the benefit of local communities that feel that they have been dispossessed and ignored for too long. This task will not be easy, as the industry differs in its make-up and needs around the country. We require a national policy framework that has the flexibility to respond to different demands, so as to allow the industry to flourish locally, all around the UK coast. I look forward to welcoming the Minister to Lowestoft next month, so that he can set out his vision for this national framework, and so that locally we can set about the task of providing that local plan that will enable the industry again to play a leading role in the East Anglian coastal economy.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Thank you, Mr Aldous—top of the class. I call Huw Merriman.

3.8 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Thank you, Mr Paisley. It is a pleasure to be called to speak. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) for securing this debate.

If ever there was an industry that showed us the benefits of the UK leaving the European Union, it is the fisheries industry. In 2015, trawlers from EU member states took 683,000 tonnes from UK waters, whereas the UK fleet took 111,000 tonnes from member states' waters, so we can clearly see the disparity. In the English

[*Huw Merriman*]

channel, which is near my constituency, 84% of the cod quota is given to the French, leaving just 9% to the UK. The Danish trawling fleet takes 85% of all its fish from UK waters, so this is a fantastic opportunity that we should embrace.

Unfortunately, the inshore waters off of East Sussex, which I represent, have barely any fish. For that reason, I support the bid from the marine conservation zone for a new zone to be set up for Beachy Head East, which would run from Beachy Head lighthouse to Hastings pier. It has the huge support of my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd). That area of water, which would run out for six nautical miles, is rich in marine biodiversity, but unfortunately the trawlers that have taken their catch have also taken absolutely everything else. That was brought home to us locally when a sea angling competition caught no sea bass whatever, despite that being the target of the catch. Although I am hugely optimistic for our policy post Britain leaving the European Union, I ask the Minister to note the words, “Beachy Head East marine conservation zone application” and the support that I want to press upon him, because the reality is, unless we protect and preserve our stock, there will be nothing there for future generations.

3.10 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley.

Brexit creates a unique and golden opportunity to rejuvenate a multibillion pound industry for our nation. It is an opportunity, should we successfully grasp it, to create a sustainable and successful fishing industry such as those of Norway, Iceland and the Faroes. I am sure all coastal Members received a communication from the Minister with responsibility for coastal communities, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), about round five of the coastal communities fund, totalling £40 million. That is hugely welcome and I hope to promote bids from South Thanet, but we have in our coastal communities, on our doorsteps, especially my own, the ability to bring real added value to communities without additional help from the Government, welcome as it is.

A fishing industry that in 1950 employed 48,000 people is now down to just 12,000 people today. An added lunacy is that this country, described by Aneurin Bevan in 1945 as an island

“made mainly of coal and surrounded by fish”,

now imports 238,000 tonnes of fish a year worth £1.3 billion. We have a trade deficit in fish alone of more than a quarter of a billion pounds. Whichever way we measure the CFP, it has been an environmental, ecological and financial disaster. In 2012, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee found that 1.7 million tonnes of good fish were discarded annually across the EU: some 23% of the catch. In a world of want, that represents not only a moral outrage but an ecological disgrace. If the CFP is bad for our industry, it is even worse for our fish.

I do not know how the Fisheries Minister manages to be so cheerful when he goes to Brussels every December. I would guess he doesn't. We face a total allowable catch allocation of quotas that bears little relation to what is

on the ground. I speak to my local fishermen and they say there is an abundance of thornback ray, which is lumped together in the EU-wide skates and rays analysis as a whole. The EU considers skates and rays to be at risk, so our quota is remarkably low.

We have had problems with sea bass. A lot of my local fishermen who have not been able to catch sea bass have undertaken recreational fishing by taking day anglers out. In the first six months of the year, we are not even allowed to catch and release, let alone catch and keep. My fleet in South Thanet in Ramsgate is in the under 10-metre class. I propose that it receive the most light touch regulations, if not wide-ranging exemptions. It is completely environmentally friendly. It barely dents the stocks and it presents the most benefit to coastal communities. Such fleets represent 70% of the UK fleet, employ 65% of those working in UK fishing, yet they receive 4% of the total quota.

I fully support the effort control system proposed by Fishing for Leave, and I hope the Minister and the Secretary of State will look at that. What we do not want during the implementation period is to somehow get dragged along with a perpetual CFP. We have the opportunity for a Brexit dividend. We have an opportunity to take back control of our seas and to rejuvenate our local fishing communities. I call on the Government to exempt fishing from any transition deal. Really importantly, we need unilaterally to ban pulse beaming, which has been catastrophic on spawning areas, particularly against our demersal species.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I am not imposing a formal time limit, but I ask Members to try to keep their speeches short.

3.14 pm

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I will try to keep my speech as brief as I can. Fortunately, many hon. and right hon. Members have already said a lot of what I was going to say. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on securing today's debate. It is great to see such a large turnout.

Now is an exciting time for British fishing. As we move through the process of leaving the EU and the CFP, Brexit provides a sea of opportunity for the fishing industry, but we need to maintain stability and security for our fishermen in the short term. Any radical shift in policy taken at this stage must be very carefully considered, and we should look to best practice abroad when deliberating on the way forward.

It was interesting to hear the example of the Faroe Islands, which I understand are moving away from the current effort-based system because they believe it has proven to be a contributory factor to the decline of their stocks. As I understand it, they depart from the effort-based system on 1 January 2019, as agreed by their Parliament last year. The Faroese Government stated:

“Small fishing vessels which conduct coastal fisheries on a smaller scale will, however, continue to base their activity on annually allocated fishing days.”

It is a hybrid approach that might be appropriate in some cases.

It is worth noting the great success that the Scottish fleet has had recently in rebuilding the number of stocks, including North sea cod. That has all been achieved within the current quota-based system. There has been broad agreement over the past few months on both sides of the debate that if we are to move towards an effort-based system, it should be piloted first on a small-scale fishery. If that shows promising results, it would surely confirm once and for all whether that is a way forward.

Iceland uses an effort-based system only for some stocks, specifically lumpfish and sea urchins. All other fishing is operated on a rights-based system. Effort-based systems are viewed over there as a useful way to manage small-scale targeted fisheries, not large-scale mixed fisheries. Of course, around the United Kingdom we have one of the largest, if not the largest, mixed fisheries in the world. Because of that, it is important to recognise that not all fisheries are made equal. Mixed fisheries in the northern North sea are vastly different from fisheries in other parts of Scotland, let alone the rest of the UK.

I want us to continue with the drive towards regionalisation that the UK Government have previously supported in a European context. Why stop at Edinburgh, for example, when it comes to Scotland? Where exactly we draw the line is something we will have further discussions about as we go through the process of leaving the EU and the CFP, but ideally the resource should always be managed by those closest to it, and, as other hon. Members have said, with the input of those who know the fisheries best: the fishermen themselves. I would like to see all fisheries managed at the point most local to the fishery, with the exception of some high-level decisions that will need to be taken at a UK-wide level, especially as we become a fully independent coastal state.

3.18 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I will try to be as brief as my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), Mr Paisley.

As I have said, any management system must have buy-in from the industry and must also be flexible enough to allow for massive fluctuations in stocks, such as the massive fluctuation in the bass stocks that we saw in the south-west this year. At the end of the day, fishermen cannot tell what is swimming into their net. They capture bass. If they cannot land the fish, they get discarded on the sea bed, dead, and that does not help anybody, particularly with the conservation of fish stocks. The system must also be able to accommodate mixed-species capture in a mixed fishery, such as we have in the south-west, to allow utilisation on board boats of all stocks that are kept and also to meet our obligations under article 62 of the United Nations convention on the law of the sea. We should utilise the maximum amount of scientifically approved stocks for the benefit of the United Kingdom fleet.

We joined the European Union at a time when I was connected to the industry, and I look to the Minister to provide me and the United Kingdom's fisheries with the assurance that we shall not sacrifice access to resources to buy access to a market, which is what happened at that time. We have to put right the wrong that took place. I want the Minister to provide me with that

assurance, as well as the assurance that on 29 March 2019 we shall leave the common fisheries policy. I fully accept the possibility that we will have to allow an implementation period. We owe that not only to British fishermen but to our European partners.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the London agreement provisions must be included as well, and they must not hang over?

Mrs Murray: As I understand it, we are leaving the London convention of 1964 as well.

Will the Minister confirm today that, even with an implementation period, we shall leave the common fisheries policy on 29 March 2019, and that access to resources will not be sacrificed to buy access to the market?

3.21 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), on securing the debate.

Like many other Members taking part in this afternoon's debate, I represent a coastal constituency—31 miles of magnificent North sea coastline from St Cyrus to Portlethen. However, I am unlike most of those Members, in that I do not represent much of a fishing industry—certainly not as much as my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) or the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) represent. But the fishing industry is important to me, and should be to all Members, not just because of its impact on the communities that immediately rely on its success, but because fishermen are the best of British. The audacity, ingenuity and energy shown by individuals in the industry in the face of overwhelming odds, regulation, legislation, bans, plans and forced decommissioning should be commended. It is through their sheer determination and innovation, not the words of politicians and civil servants, that record landings are being made at Peterhead. Amazingly, last year North sea cod was recertified as sustainable. That is why we cannot let fishermen down now, and why before my election I signed a pledge committing me to do what I can to ensure that the UK is taken out of the common fisheries policy at the earliest available opportunity. That means 11 pm on 29 March 2019.

I voted remain in the referendum in 2016, but I have no reservations in saying that exiting the European Union can only be a good thing for our fishing industry. It will allow us to forge a new fisheries policy, freed from Brussels diktats and overseas interests, and away from that most harmful of European directives, on equal access to a common resource—a phrase invented only on Britain's entry to the European Community. We will be able to drive and implement policies that work for our fishermen and our fishing industry.

To those—and they are out there—who think that fishermen do not care about the environment or sustainability and that somehow an independent UK will abandon our commitment to sustainable stocks and good management, I say that is nonsense. No other industry is as invested in protecting its future, the sustainability of its stock, and its environment as the

[Andrew Bowie]

British fishing industry. As one fisherman said to me not long ago, of course fishermen want sustainable fisheries: no fish, no industry—it is simple.

The Brexit vote has led to great optimism in the Scottish fishing industry, and not without good reason. Brexit offers a host of opportunities for reviving our fisheries and our coastal communities in general. It now falls to us to deliver it for them.

3.23 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): When I think of the time I spent in Brussels, sitting in sweaty rooms negotiating the reform of the common fisheries policy, I sometimes think, “Was that time all wasted?” I suggest that it was not, because the principles that we secured in the reforms are absolutely valid for the measures we need in future, to manage our fisheries after we leave the EU. The core theme that runs through the 25-year environment plan is the desire to leave the natural environment in a better state than the one in which we found it.

The marine environment is every bit as important as the terrestrial one, and key elements of the common fisheries reforms are consistent with that approach. A legal requirement to fish according to maximum sustainable yield, an end to discarding and to the top-down management of fisheries, and putting management of fisheries on a more local basis are key themes that should continue. The key principles should also be grounded in an ecosystems approach. Fish shoal in one area of sea, spawn in another and chase seasonally-dependent nutrition in another. Many of those areas cross national boundaries, so co-operation across those boundaries is vital. I want to hear what the Minister says about the Government’s thinking about that.

There is a cumulative effect from human activities. Overfishing, acidification, increased water temperature, cables and windfarms all have an impact on the management of our waters. There can be opportunities that come from that, and, in relation to marine planning as well as fisheries, I want a holistic view to be taken of the management of our seas. The fishing industry is a key part of that.

I join with every other Member of the House who has dissed the common fisheries policy, given the problems that it brought on our seas and coastal communities; but even if we had never gone into it, we would still face problems, because man’s ability to harvest from the oceans through increased technology has grown exponentially. We should still have faced the same problems of under-abundance that we face, to an extent, now—added to which the CFP made things much worse.

It is very important to consider how a legal requirement to fish sustainably, imposed under a pan-national organisation, is to be replaced by us as an independent state outside that organisation. The Secretary of State has spoken about the new body that will administer the environment, and what he said about that and about the process is also important. The Government will lay a national policy statement before Parliament, and that may require a separate marine policy statement. I hope that that, too, will be fundamentally linked to science and evidence, and that we shall produce a coherent, holistic system of management of our seas.

3.26 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): The phrase I now hear most commonly, by a big majority, from UK voters on the issue of Brexit is: “Get on with it.” They are amazed at how long it is taking. I take some comfort when Ministers assure us that the two years and nine months that will elapse between our decision and our departure will be sufficient to prepare everything needed for a smooth transition in the event that there is no agreement. I know that the Government want an agreement, and I wish them well with their negotiations, but it is important for us to learn that everything will be ready. I am sure that the Minister, an enthusiastic supporter of a UK fishing industry, is up there with the best in making sure that things are ready. I should like him to confirm that, because the Government assure us that everything will work on 30 March 2019, that will certainly be true of an independent fishery, if the general negotiations go badly.

Like many others who represent fishing communities, I urge the Minister not to allow the fishing industry to be sucked into any agreement over so-called long transition or implementation. Two years and nine months is quite long enough to work out what we are going to do, and to put in place the things that are needed. Will the Minister promise us, in the next year and a month remaining before our exit from the common fisheries policy, an early White Paper? It is time now, after extensive consultation and study, for us to have a statement of Government intent, to which fishing communities can respond promptly, so that we have a firm and settled policy that will indeed be kinder to our fishermen, fishing grounds, economic interests and fish stocks, as many have described.

Will the Minister promise that we shall then go on to legislate this year, so that any legal powers necessary for the new framework will be up and running in good time, by the time we leave on 30 March 2019? Does he agree with me, and with the sense I get from the debate, that the fishing industry is perhaps the worst damaged of all the many industries that have been damaged by various EU policies—although time does not allow us to talk about that—and that therefore it is even more urgent for fishing to be extracted from EU controls and direction, so that we can again give priority to local and UK interests, and to conservation interests? That is my challenge to the Minister: White Paper, legislation, independence, victory, better industry, conservation of fish stocks. A simple task—I know he is up to it.

3.29 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to serve under your charismatic chairmanship, Mr Paisley, and I congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on securing this debate and on his assiduous attention to fisheries. He is looking to 31 March 2019 and for no transition period at all, and said interesting things about effort control, the time-at-sea versus a quota-based approach, and a hybrid of the two. I am quite friendly with a Faroese fisherman, Høgni Hoydal—he has had his own efforts and struggles with his fisheries community. I will investigate further what the hon. Gentleman suggests. If I have understood correctly, he wants nothing to do with the common fisheries policy if we have a transition deal.

Net soak time is an interesting issue of which the Minister and hon. Members, should be aware. The hon. Gentleman talked about Britain's fish—the UK's fish—but when it comes to Brexit, we know that 111 powers will be going to Scotland, including on fisheries. I therefore take his use of “Britain” to mean “England”, but I will not overly chastise him because that happens from time to time. I note, however, the interesting idea—I am quite sympathetic to it—regarding all quotas, or fish, landed in the UK. When the Scottish fisheries Minister tried to implement such a measure, he came up against a bit of push-back, but it is worthy of consideration. If people are playing a patriotic game with fish catching, they can also play it with fish landing, and that would be well worth while.

The hon. Gentleman did not mention shellfish. I represent the Outer Hebrides, which has a consistent, long, 200-mile coastline and coastal waters, and 150 miles of land. It is probably the constituency with the largest sea area, and one of the largest in the Westminster Parliament, although sadly it is the smallest by number of constituents. We sell a lot of shellfish to the French and Spanish, and some even goes to China. Unfortunately, the good people of England cannot afford it, but if they are prepared to pay more, we are prepared to sell them shellfish from the Hebrides. It is the tastiest stuff to be found. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) said that the Norwegians were in the single market to avoid non-tariff barriers. Fisheries in the Hebrides are very worried about not being in the single market—non-tariff barriers are particularly important to them.

The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) made an excellent speech—according to our charismatic Chair he was top of the class. I had him down as “thoughtful”, but I also noted “top of the class”, which indeed he was. His speech contained so many bits and pieces of information that I will have to go back and look at *Hansard*—perhaps with you, Mr Paisley—so that we pick up the nuggets in that veritable goldmine. His points about entitlements to a local fishery were important, as was the possible reorganisation of fisheries. We must remember that established fishing interests might not be that keen on such things, but the hon. Gentleman was very exercised about supporting communities that feel they have lost out over a number of years.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was surprised to be called so early in the debate—I cannot imagine how or why that happened, other than due to his natural skill and assiduousness in debates. Last night, it was remarked that he was probably the only Member who is expected to turn up to Adjournment debates other than the Minister, their private secretary, and the person who secured the debate, and he deserves to be called for that alone. He said that boats have been lost to European bureaucracy, but we must remember that the UK Government signed up in the 1990s to scrap boats. We must also recognise the issue of technology—that point was touched on by the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon). Iceland has lost a lot of boats, and fishing communities there moan a lot about what they have lost because of the march of technology. At one time, 25% of Iceland's population worked in fisheries; now it is 4%. Icelanders hope to have even less of their population working in

fisheries, such is the march of technology. Their boats have saunas on them nowadays—that stuff is unimaginable to fishermen in the Outer Hebrides.

The hon. Member for Strangford also mentioned crew from the Philippines, who play a vital role. The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) said that fishermen were the best of British, or the best of everything going—I used to be a fisherman myself, although I was not as good as half the lads I stood alongside—but 27.4% of our crews are from outside the UK, and a good number of them, as the hon. Member for Strangford knows, are from places such as the Philippines and Ghana. We need more of them.

Mr Carmichael: Has the hon. Gentleman found, as I have recently, that notwithstanding the insistence that those crews work in the UK only on the basis of a transit visa, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs now insist that they pay income tax here?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: HMRC and the Government have taken a number of steps to lose tax over a number of years, so it is interesting that they might be trying to have the best of both worlds, or have their cake and eat it, while leaving some of our boats unfortunately without fishermen.

I am mindful of time—I agreed to give up some of my time so that more Members could speak, because I think a plurality of voice is important. The hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) mentioned 29 March 2019, as did a number of other Members. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) expressed the frustration that we all feel with the centralised, bureaucratic and unresponsive CFP. The point about data collection every two years was important.

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) mentioned the Danes. I was reminded of how the Secretary of State had one message for our fishermen when he was in Peterhead, but when he was in Copenhagen a few weeks later, quite a different message for our fishermen turned up on Twitter, together with a nice message for the fishermen of Jutland. Perhaps we can get that sorted out one way or the other.

Coal and fish were mentioned by the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), as was Aneurin Bevan. I am tempted to ask who sold out the fisheries and closed down the pits, but I wouldn't do that. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) made important points about the improvement in fish stocks. Nineteen key stocks are now about 70% fished to sustainability, up from 60% in 2015. There has been some improvement.

I have debated with the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) in this Chamber many a time. In fact, many years ago, she tragically lost her late husband and is forever held in respect in fisheries debates—we all listen closely to whatever she has to say.

The right hon. Member for Newbury was right in what he said about the tragedy of the commons. That can affect fisheries, and we must remember that under the previous fisheries policy, herring stocks collapsed from overfishing. We must look to ourselves, because we are as guilty as anybody if given the opportunity to go over the quota on fishing.

[Angus Brendan MacNeil]

I would like to touch on a number of points, but will not because I promised to allow others to speak. However, I wish to stress the importance of migrant workers. We talk about getting migrant workers in for agriculture, but we need them for fisheries as well. People come from the Philippines and Ghana—I know some of them personally—and they live on the island I am from. They are fantastic men and we need more of them. They are great and they add to the community. We want them and there is no reason for not having them. It is usually the Minister responsible for immigration in London who stops them coming—everybody else wants them. I asked the Secretary of State what will happen to EU boats when he takes the quota from them, whether there will be a difference between a historic quota and a boat quota, and how and when that will happen. He dodged the question and said that the catch was going on

“to the plates of people from the Western Isles to the south-west of England,”—[*Official Report*, 25 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 396.]

I said, “Good dodge”, and he said, “Thank you” in the Chamber, but today I am looking for more of a straight answer from the Minister.

Finally, the antipathy that I and many others feel towards the CFP is not really mirrored in Ireland, and I wonder whether they had better negotiators back in the ’70s and the ’90s than we had in Scotland going through London. Certainly, Ireland would not move discussions from Dublin to London, which is why we should start in Edinburgh this time round.

3.38 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), and I thank you, Mr Paisley, for chairing this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on securing this debate. He opened proceedings with an incredibly balanced and insightful speech, and has a passion for fishing. I think I speak for everybody when I say that we are all ears regarding any and all measures we can consider that will put an end to the wasteful practice of discards. I lend my support to his proposal to pilot schemes wherever possible, so that we can build that evidence base and inform the incredibly important decisions in the following weeks and months that will form the basis of future UK fisheries policy.

Today’s debate is timely and important considering that we are just over a year away from leaving the European Union, and phase 2, which will include negotiations on the future of fisheries, is about to begin. As with the annual fisheries debate last December, however, it is not entirely possible to use this opportunity to consider, scrutinise, or get to grips with the detail of fisheries policy post-Brexit because those negotiations have not yet happened. Nor have we had policy papers of any colour to help shape or steer the discussion. With the timetable for the fisheries Bill still shrouded in ambiguity, it brings me early in my speech to my first ask to the Minister. MPs on both sides of the House, as well as stakeholders across the fishing industry, would be grateful for any update on the timetable for policy

papers and the fisheries Bill to assist with preparations for what will be an incredibly intense period once that process gets under way.

As we have already heard, there are a range of Brexit interests and opinions within the UK’s fishing community. People’s fears and aspirations for a post-Brexit policy vary significantly based on where they are in the country and what is being fished. Those fishing eels in Northern Ireland—I sympathise with the frustrations of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—will have a different outlook from the trawlermen from Peterhead, and the large fish processors in places such as Grimsby will see things very differently from anglers in Lyme Regis.

To ensure that the Labour party has the most comprehensive understanding of those variations, at the end of last year we launched a consultation ahead of the upcoming fisheries Bill. We want to ensure that those with an interest can have a say in that process, and I am looking forward to going through those submissions in detail when the consultation closes.

The rhetoric of the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has driven expectations for a significant uplift in economic activity in the fishing sector, which we are all keen to see. It will not have escaped the Minister, however, that much of this Government’s rhetoric on fishing has been far from harmonised with that of the EU27. Has the Minister seen, and had chance to reflect on, the draft statement produced by the European Parliament’s Committee on Fisheries—the PECH Committee—which will form the European Parliament’s resolution next month that will facilitate phase 2 of the Brexit negotiations? The statement makes it crystal clear that the EU27 will seek to ensure mutual access to waters and resources in accordance with the relative stability principle. It stresses that reciprocal market access for fishery products has to be negotiated as part of a free trade agreement or an association agreement, and that the level of access to the EU domestic market has to be conditional on the level of access for EU vessels to UK fishing grounds, linking both matters in the agreements.

That position could not be any more at odds with this Government or the Secretary of State. Faced with that, will the Minister outline for hon. Members the Government’s red lines on fishing? Will the Government seek to deal with access to waters and access to the single market separately, or accept the PECH Committee’s terms of both matters being intrinsically linked? How do they intend to build support for our position within the remaining EU27?

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Could the hon. Lady clarify what the Labour party’s position is? Has she just read out the Labour party’s position? Is it what the PECH Committee has said?

Holly Lynch: No. I want to be clear that the policy statement has come from the PECH Committee of the European Parliament. We will all have our concerns. We are going through that consultation and will outline it in more detail in the coming weeks, but I am clear that we are about to embark on phase 2. That is the position of the EU27, and I am keen to get the Minister’s perspective on it.

With that in mind, I appreciate that the Government have been walking a tightrope for months. Despite his tough taking-back-control narrative, the Secretary of State apparently told the Danish market back in August of last year that

“boats from EU countries will still be able to operate in UK waters after Brexit, as the UK does not have enough capacity to catch and process all its fish alone.”

During the annual fisheries debate in December, I asked the Minister for the evidence base for that assertion, which has been contested by the representative fishing organisations that I have met—they have been mentioned in the debate. Can he add any more meat to the bones of that suggestion?

As an MP for a thriving fishing community, the Minister will be aware that access to European markets is incredibly important for our fishing industry. Although the level of dependence on the European market varies by sector, up to 85% of our crab, lobster and prawns are sold into Europe. We will need the freest possible trade with our neighbours if we are to satisfy the demand from European consumers for our top-quality shellfish.

Last year, the *Financial Times* reported on the Coast Seafood company on Norway's west coast, which is obliged to pay 2% tariffs on exports of raw salmon, trout and herring to the EU. If it wants to sell processed products such as smoked salmon or salted fish, those are classed as value-added and, in the case of smoked salmon, face a tax of 13%. That is because Norway is outside both the EU and the customs union. The firm's owner told the paper that the tariffs hold back the Norwegian industry. It is for that reason that Labour is committed to a customs union with the EU. We want to prioritise trade and ensure that those routes to market for our seafood products remain open. A situation where fish processing becomes uncompetitive would be a massive problem for constituencies such as Grimsby.

Joanna Cherry: The Brexit Committee was told by Norwegian witnesses that, because Norway is not in the customs union, there are high tariffs on processed fish and they send their fish to Poland and Germany to be processed. Does the hon. Lady agree that, if the United Kingdom leaves the customs union, many fish processing jobs will be lost in Scotland and beyond?

Holly Lynch: That is the fear. There will be constituencies around the UK, such as Grimsby, where many jobs are involved in the fish processing sector. We seek clarity on that from the Government as we go into the negotiations.

John Redwood: Is the hon. Lady also saying that it is Labour policy that we should be prepared to bargain away fish stocks in order to get that customs agreement?

Holly Lynch: I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the opening speech, where we had a nuanced approach. That will be in the discussions. Access to markets will be important for our fish, but having control of our waters is incredibly important. The Government will have to strike that balance as they go into the negotiations, which is what we are reflecting on today.

In contrast, the Conservative Government have moved from saying that they want trade with the EU after Brexit to be tariff-free to saying that they want trade to be as tariff-free as possible. It is starting to feel as

though we are moving only backwards against the Government's, if not the leave campaign's, initial bold assertions for a post-Brexit fisheries policy.

It is reassuring that there is firm common ground between the fishing industry, conservationists, recreational fishers and consumers alike that a sustainable approach to a new fishing policy is the only game in town. That was the theme running through a fisheries discussion of experts that I chaired on behalf of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology just last week. For a sustainable approach to work, however, we need two things if we are to have confidence in managing fish stocks responsibly. We need a means of robustly enforcing our approach, and we need to get the science right. Those two things have been mentioned in the debate today, and I am sure they will be considerations for the Minister in the coming weeks and months.

There is renewed public awareness of the need for action to preserve our marine environments—a point made passionately by the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon). I am hopeful that consumer movements will play an important role in reducing the plastic waste in our waters. The success of the Marine Stewardship Council certifications shows how environmentally aware consumers can bring about positive change. However, we will need Government action to prevent plastics and protect marine environments.

Labour are proud of our record in government and of introducing the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009. We included bold commitments in our manifesto ahead of last year's general election. We support the blue belt proposals for our overseas territories, and our recently released animal welfare plan announced a consultation on the creation of national marine parks. I hope that those matters will not be overlooked as the negotiations on the future of the UK's fisheries policy move forward.

Marine protection and fisheries management, as we have already heard, are two sides of the same coin. If we get it right and set the standard both domestically and in our waters around the world, we can secure a flourishing marine environment and a strong and profitable fisheries sector. However, on many of the biggest questions faced by the fisheries sector, hopes are high, but we are still in the dark on much of the detail. There are plenty of opportunities for our fishermen and women and our coastal communities as we leave the EU, but what we desperately need from this Government is the road map, outlining just how we deliver against those opportunities.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Given that the mover of the motion had such a good innings, I do not intend to call him to make a wind-up. I call the Minister, George Eustice.

3.48 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Thank you, Mr Paisley. May I begin my thanking my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) and congratulating him on securing this debate? I know that this is very important to him, as a fellow Cornish MP. All of us, including my hon. Friends the Members for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) and for St Ives (Derek Thomas), are very aware of the importance of the industry to our area.

[George Eustice]

We have had many contributions from Members from a whole range of coastal communities, including my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), who has probably got more fisheries in his constituency than the rest of us put together. It is a huge industry in his constituency. We have also had very thoughtful contributions from many Members, including my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), who made some important points. The last reform of the CFP, which he was instrumental in, established some important principles. As we leave the European Union and the CFP, it is important that we do not lose sight of the fact that the principles behind policies such as fishing sustainably, using MSY as a key target and making a legal commitment to do so, the discard ban and the landing obligation were right.

Several hon. Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), asked for an update on the situation. He will have noticed that we published our agricultural Command Paper today, and when it comes to fisheries, he does not have much longer to wait. That paper is well advanced: various drafts are being worked on and hon. Members can expect it to be published later in spring. My right hon. Friend will be aware that the Queen's Speech set out a clear commitment for a fisheries Bill in this Session. The intention is for it to be introduced later this year, possibly—probably—before the summer recess. That is the timescale we are working to.

My right hon. Friend asked whether we would be ready in the event that we come out of the European Union at the end of March 2019 without any agreement, including without an implementation period. The answer is yes. On all fronts, Government are working on contingency plans to ensure that we are ready. In the case of fisheries, that predominantly means ensuring that we plan to have adequate capacity for processing catch certificates, for example, which will be important for our export trade, and adequate enforcement capacity to police our exclusive economic zone.

As we leave the European Union, the international legal position is straightforward and beyond doubt. Under the UN convention on the law of the sea, the UK becomes an independent coastal state, just like the Faroe Islands, Norway and Iceland. That means that we take control of our exclusive economic zone of 200 nautical miles or the median line, in which we have responsibility for managing access and managing that resource. UNCLOS also requires us to co-operate with our neighbours on shared resources and shared stocks, which we intend to do anyway.

Several hon. Members mentioned the 1964 London fisheries convention. Last July, under the terms of that convention, we gave two years' notice of our intention to quit. That historic agreement gave us some access to some member states in our six to 12-mile zone, so it seemed important to withdraw from it at the same time as we review access arrangements.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) pointed out, there is a huge imbalance in the apportionment of fishing opportunities. In each year between 2012 and 2016, the EU fleet took 760,000 tonnes of fish on average from UK waters. In that same

period, the average annual take by the UK fleet from EU waters was 90,000 tonnes. We have been clear that, as we regain control of access and the management of our resources, our intention is to rebalance that arrangement.

The hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) pointed out that the European Union's Committee on Fisheries—PECH—would like things to stay the same, but it would say that. Why would it not, when the deal is so imbalanced? However, at the end of the day, it does not really matter what the European Union asks for, but what we are prepared to grant it. That is the approach that we will take. We will work in an honourable and sensible way with our European partners, while recognising that we will have control of our exclusive economic zone.

Huw Merriman: On that basis, does the Minister agree that we can have our fishcake and eat it?

George Eustice: That is a very good way of putting it.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall talked about some of Fishing for Leave's proposals. I have met Fishing for Leave on several occasions. Our officials in the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science and in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs have also met with it about its proposals.

At the heart of it, one of the things I have learned as a fisheries Minister is that nothing ever quite works—there are pros and cons to everything, because the marine environment is incredibly complex. As the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) pointed out, quota regimes tend to work well where there are single-species fisheries, particularly for pelagic fish such as mackerel. It would be inconceivable to move away from a quota regime if we were targeting those pelagic fish. An effort regime can work better where there is a highly mixed fishery with different species and where there is an inshore fleet with a limited quota, but it is quite bureaucratic to send small inshore fishermen out with a quota of 20 kilos of cod for an entire month and expect them to manage with that. We are looking at some of those ideas.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: With regard to mixed fisheries, if we did have an effort regime, would it have the flexibility to compensate fishermen by allowing them to land the bass catches, for example, that they find in their nets?

George Eustice: If I have time, I will return to the bass. In principle, it probably does not make a lot of difference, because it would depend on the bycatch provisions.

There are pros and cons to those systems, and we are looking closely at them, as well as at the hybrid model that my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall outlined. It is something that we would want to introduce carefully—my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury, pointed out that his Ramsgate trial was not altogether successful.

My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall raised the issue of trade, but I regard that as a separate negotiation: there is a discussion on fisheries management and a separate discussion on trade.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): There is a tension between having devolved matters in fishing and agriculture and a UK approach to trade. Does the Minister agree that there needs to be some reconciliation of that tension? How does he propose to deal with that?

George Eustice: Fisheries negotiations are international, so they are a UK competence, but we always take members of the devolved Administrations with us as part of our delegation. Trade and fisheries are both UK competences, but I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall that they should be kept separate.

We have a huge trade deficit in food with the European Union. A sensible basis for the discussion is that we will buy its food, if it buys ours. However, the difference in fish is not as big as some envisage, although we have a trade surplus. We export just over £1 billion of fish to the EU, but we import just short of £1 billion.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall mentioned the issue of spider crabs and promoting other fish species. A levy body called Seafish is responsible for that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

George Eustice: I will try to make a little headway, otherwise we will not get to anybody else.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall also mentioned pulse trawling. I have previously made clear that we have concerns about that and I have asked CEFAS to look at it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous)—whose constituency is the home of CEFAS, the world's leading centre for science in fisheries—raised the issue of the small inshore fleet, for which he has been a consistent campaigner. Through the discard

quota uplift, we have already sought to give the inshore fleet a significant quota increase, but leaving the EU is another opportunity to look at some of those management operations.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) mentioned the complex issue of skates and rays. There are over 20 different species of skates and rays, some of which are prohibited, and it is very difficult to get their management right. Our long-term objective is to break the composite total allowable catch down into individual species.

On the issue of bass, which my hon. Friends the Members for South East Cornwall and for North Cornwall raised, there should have been a larger bycatch provision for trawlers, as there was last year. We did not agree with the Commission's approach, but we were unable to win the argument this time.

We have had a good debate. It was clearly not long enough, because nearly every hon. Member had their contribution cut short. I reassure hon. Members that we will have plenty of time to discuss the issue in future.

I have time to mention the issue of trade from countries such as Norway. Several hon. Members pointed to the small tariffs on those countries, but they ignored the autonomous tariff-rate quota allowances, which are tariff-free quotas that we could create and that the EU creates. On species such as cod, Norway does not pay tariffs and we import large quantities of fish from Iceland that is tariff free under the preferential trade or ATQ—autonomous tariff quota—system. There are many devices that we can use in international trade to deal with those issues.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, and no doubt we will have many more such debates in the months ahead.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered future UK fisheries policy.

National Democracy Week

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to an important debate about National Democracy Week, for which there is probably no one more qualified to move the motion than Mr Chris Skidmore.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered National Democracy Week.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to highlight the importance of the week beginning 2 July 2018, which the Government announced last year as the inaugural National Democracy Week. I should declare my interest: I was the Cabinet Office Minister who made that announcement on 15 September 2017, committing the Government to establishing the week. I hope the Minister does not feel that I am appearing as a ministerial Banquo's ghost; it is not my intention to haunt my old Department, but to highlight the week's potential, not only for the Minister and the Cabinet Office—the Department responsible for democratic engagement—but for promoting democratic engagement and the concept of democratic inclusion, as defined in the Government's recent democratic engagement plan.

We chose the week beginning 2 July as National Democracy Week because it will mark the 90th anniversary of the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928, which gave women a truly equal right to vote. As the Minister will be aware, although we recently celebrated the 100th anniversary of the right for women to vote being won by the suffrage movement, that right applied only to women over the age of 30; it was another 10 years before Stanley Baldwin's Conservative Government passed the legislation that placed men and women on an equal footing in the eyes of our democracy.

As part of this year's suffrage centenary celebrations, National Democracy Week has the opportunity not only to highlight the importance of the 1928 Act and its place in history but to look ahead. That is vital, because it will allow us to ask ourselves whether we believe the franchise is truly equal or whether there is more we can do to ensure that every voice matters in our democracy and that we are content that our democracy is truly working for everyone in society.

I am delighted that 100 years and a day after the Representation of the People Act 1918, the Minister introduced legislation to ensure that the process of anonymous registration would be made much easier for survivors of domestic violence. It demonstrates that, as a matter of social justice, we elected representatives must always listen closely to voices who state that they are still struggling to exercise their democratic right to vote. One campaigner, Mehala Osborne, a survivor of domestic violence, found that she was unable to vote in the mayoral elections in Bristol, so with Women's Aid on board, she began a campaign for a more democratic society. She demonstrated that despite the fact that we are celebrating the 100th anniversary of women getting the right to vote, there are still women in society who are unable to vote because they may be put at risk if

they join the electoral register publicly. I am delighted that the Minister has taken action to change that situation so that survivors of domestic violence can much more easily register anonymously to vote in this year's local elections.

It is clear that in this year of celebration of suffrage and democracy, there are still people in this country who, through no fault of their own, cannot vote—not citizens who refuse to engage in the democratic process, tragic as that is, but active citizens whose voice continues to go unheard because they are unable to participate in elections. Although legislation can give the appearance of equal rights and participation, the reality is that modern Governments always have to look again at the barriers that prevent certain groups in society from exercising their democratic right to vote.

For people who have learning disabilities or physical disabilities, I know that the Government are committed to working to ensure that every stage of the democratic process is as smooth and clear as possible, with their review of the accessibility of elections. For people whose voice may be silenced by electoral fraud, I know that the Government's plans to increase electoral integrity will be of real value, preventing impersonation at polling stations, tightening the application process for postal votes and reducing the threat of intimidation—not only for voters at polling stations, but for candidates standing for election.

Those are important reforms for today that will help to strengthen our democratic process and give people the right to vote, but we should also think of tomorrow. We may not know what tomorrow will bring, but I believe that this year and in future years, National Democracy Week should help to provide a vital forum to discuss what more we need to do collectively to strengthen our democracy and meet future challenges. Some of those challenges we know about and some are still unknowable, but we will have a week to consider them.

Civil society organisations have already organised events such as National Voter Registration Week. Such events have been highly successful in years of electoral activity, but less so in what I call the years of peacetime. I hope that the establishment of National Democracy Week will allow all civil society groups and political parties, regardless of colour, to rally around the first week of every July so that it becomes a permanent fixture in the political and democratic calendar of the United Kingdom. The July date will also allow it to mark the beginning of the annual canvass. I recognise that the canvass is well overdue for reform, which will undoubtedly happen, but I hope that local authorities across the country will recognise the value of the week and take the opportunity to highlight their own electoral registration processes to ensure that every eligible member can join that year's electoral register.

My ambition when establishing National Democracy Week was not only for at least one event to take place in every local authority across the country, starting at a low level and building up in future years, but for as many Members of Parliament and elected local councillors as possible to get involved and speak in schools—perhaps on the Friday, when hon. Members are back in their constituencies. That will allow us to demonstrate on social media and elsewhere the value of the week as a mass participation and engagement exercise similar to Small Business Saturday.

Much work is going on behind the scenes in preparation for this year's National Democracy Week: chapter 13 of the Government's democratic engagement plan sets out the next steps for the week, and the National Democracy Week council comprises key civil society groups involved in our democratic society. I would value an update from the Minister on the progress of preparations, but also on when she thinks the Cabinet Office will go public with the launch of a communications strategy for the week, possibly including a Twitter handle, a website, packs for parliamentarians and other materials for organisations that will lead engagement locally.

I draw the Minister's attention to the strong interest shown by the United Nations in the Government's proposals, and indeed in our democratic engagement strategy. I believe that as one of the oldest democracies in the world, the UK has a duty to encourage and inspire developing democracies to look at participation in and access to their own elections. National Democracy Week provides a real opportunity for international engagement as well as local involvement.

I know that the Minister, who was previously chair of the all-party group on democratic participation, shares my commitment that participation in our democracy, electoral registration and electoral access is more than just a technical or legal matter. It sends out a message that behind every vote is a voice that deserves to be heard, and I hope that National Democracy Week will focus on what we can do and need to do for our democratic future, just as we commemorate our democratic past.

I hope that this year's National Democracy Week will be the first of many, but its success depends on getting as many people involved in as many regions and local authorities as possible. My message to anyone who cares about democratic participation is to get involved, get involved now and contact the Cabinet Office. This is too important an issue for party politics and I hope that in 10 years' time, when we will celebrate in 2028 the 100th anniversary of that true equal franchise, National Democracy Week will still be going from strength to strength as a cornerstone of our democratic calendar.

4.10 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith):

May I say, Mr Hollobone, what a pleasure it is to have you join us today and chair this debate?

I thank my hon. Friend for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) not only for securing the debate, but for everything he has said and done on this issue during his time in this place. He shows us that these things are not just technical or legal matters that need to run and tick in the background of our democracy, but the very heart of our democracy—everybody has their place within it. I put on the record my thanks to him for his efforts in leading us so far on National Democracy Week. It is a pleasure to take up from him in fulfilling the plans for this week. I will go on to explain those plans in detail.

It is important that we cover, in our short time for debate, how organisations and individuals can be part of making National Democracy Week a success. As my hon. Friend said, it is a week of unified action. It is not only for the Government to organise, but for civil society and a range of partners. It is certainly not just for London and Westminster, but for the whole United Kingdom, to come together and participate.

I am passionate about ensuring that everybody who is entitled to vote can do so and registers to do so. Registration itself, albeit a technical and legal matter, is absolutely the prerequisite, the foundation and the bedrock for ensuring that we have a democracy that works and flourishes. As my hon. Friend rightly recognises—he published the Government's plan for democratic engagement in December last year—that means understanding the barriers that exist for particular groups and how best to tackle them.

I will come on to all of those matters in my remarks today, but I will start by reflecting on the purpose of National Democracy Week, what it aims to achieve and why it is so important. As in many things, my hon. Friend has got there ahead of me and explained why it is important that National Democracy Week should start in this particular year. This year is the double centenary of suffrage. The Government are leading and co-ordinating activities in 2018 to mark that milestone in our democracy. National Democracy Week is one of those events and is part of our approach to engage those who are perhaps less likely to participate in democracy, which certainly includes those who face physical or other barriers in trying to register to vote.

Much progress has been made towards broadening our democracy. That includes the launch of individual electoral registration, since which we have seen the enthusiasm of electors to ensure that they have their say in the democratic process. I am very proud that the register for last year's general election was, at 46.9 million, the largest ever. Indeed, more than 30 million people have applied to register to vote using the digital registration service since its launch in 2014.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The Minister is making some good points, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) on securing this debate. On digital registration, however, there is a problem with people registering to vote for general elections in multiple locations, as opposed to asserting their right to vote at a local election in a number of locations. What steps are the Minister and her Department considering taking to tackle that?

Chloe Smith: My hon. Friend makes a helpful point in reminding us that, even as we celebrate the flourishing nature of our democracy, we must also ensure that it has integrity and security. He highlights an issue that I know has been in the minds of many people, not only since last year's general election but as a general point about the process of making it easier to register to vote. Some people ask, "Well, is it easier not only to register to vote but to use one's vote in an unlawful way?", which is what he is driving at. It is not unlawful to register to vote in local elections in multiple places, but it is unlawful to vote twice in the same election. As the Minister with responsibility for electoral registration, I am looking for evidence of any such unlawfulness—my door is always open to any hon. Member who believes they have such evidence. If I received such, I would discuss it with the Electoral Commission and the relevant parts of our police authorities.

It is extremely important that we are vigilant about electoral fraud wherever we find it. In fact, to pick up on a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for

[Chloe Smith]

Kingswood, electoral fraud is not a victimless crime—it is a crime against a person whose right to speak has been robbed from them. That is very important to note in this context and this year, when we are looking to celebrate our democracy. In the context of the record highs that we are seeing in our democracy at the moment, it is important to be reassured. There are very high levels of completeness and accuracy in the electoral registers, which should give us confidence that we continue to live in a very secure democracy. We all want to keep it that way.

I am working this year with a range of organisations to build on the momentum of getting more people registered to vote. The first example of that work was noted by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood: improving how people register anonymously. Working with Women's Aid, the Electoral Commission and electoral administrators, we have developed reforms to improve access to that scheme for survivors of domestic abuse. Today marks the next phase in the parliamentary passage of the regulations dealing with that work. They will be debated first in the House of Lords and, alongside other registration changes including anti-fraud measures, taken through Parliament, but implementing them is our core aim.

I am considering measures to improve student electoral registration. That will be done not only by listening to parliamentarians and engaging again with the Electoral Commission and the Association of Electoral Administrators, but by requiring for the first time that higher education providers co-operate with electoral registration officers to facilitate electoral registration among their student population.

As a final example of that work, we can improve access for those with disabilities. A call for evidence has been launched by the Government, which I am delighted to say has returned many very helpful points. I want to understand and act on them.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I apologise for my late arrival for this debate—I was participating in the business in the main Chamber.

The Minister makes a very valuable point about vulnerable people, especially those who will be addressed in National Democracy Week and those who can now vote anonymously if they are survivors of domestic abuse. I led a debate in Westminster Hall on the Disability Confident scheme to engage more disabled people in the workforce. I hope she can continue that work in relation to democratic participation, and ensure that disabled people are as active in our democratic process as they are in our workforce.

Chloe Smith: I am absolutely delighted to find a fellow passionate advocate in my hon. Friend, and I thank him for reminding us that there is a place for everybody in our democracy, just as there is in our economy and society. That is what we are engaged in. There is more to do on exactly that. The Government's democratic engagement plan made the commitment to launch the first ever National Democracy Week to encourage greater understanding and recognition of the UK's electoral system and of how it gives all our citizens the voice they deserve.

The week will be held between 2 and 8 July this year, coinciding with both the year-long suffrage centenary celebrations and, on 2 July, the 90th anniversary of the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928, which gave equal voting rights to men and women. National Democracy Week will be a moment for engaging people from under-registered groups by uniting stakeholders in a shared ambition and in the message that, regardless of who we are or where we have come from, we must together ensure that every person in our society who is entitled to do so has a voice and an equal chance to participate in our democracy. Organisations with an interest in democratic participation will be brought together for a week of unified national action.

The week is supported by a National Democracy Week Council, which has been established as a way for organisations to support and develop the week's activities. Its members will be incredibly helpful in delivering the activities and in encouraging others to take part, and I put on record my thanks to them. The council is composed of senior figures from across the electoral community and the civil society sector, and will help us to put potential electors at the heart of the democratic process and ensure that we reach as far and wide as possible. The council's role involves advising on the events and activities, taking an active role in communicating them across the United Kingdom and in mobilising organisations, and measuring success and reporting back on the week.

The work in hand that my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood asked me to report on includes developing the creative elements of the campaign, such as the brand identity and the communications materials, which I will bring to the House as soon as I can. There will be a campaign website, and an awards ceremony to recognise outstanding achievement and innovation in democratic engagement, for which nominations will open in March 2018. There will be a great amount to do to include parliamentarians in the work and myriad ways to ensure that we reach out to under-registered groups, including young people, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities. I stress that we are strongly encouraging all parts of the United Kingdom to run events so that people everywhere have a chance to take part. I am delighted to see in this very Chamber representation from across the United Kingdom, which is very important. A programme of events will be published on a public calendar on the National Democracy Week website from later in March when the website is launched, and nominations for the awards will open in parallel.

I want to put a few points on the record about the link with the suffrage centenary. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced a £5 million fund for projects to commemorate the 2018 milestone and the significance of the suffrage movement. The centenary is momentous in its own right—hon. Members know that there will be a range of activities across Parliament. Although the centenary is distinct from National Democracy Week, the two come together in a shared objective and remind us that the rights were often hard-fought-for and therefore should be celebrated all the more.

The resources for National Democracy Week will help us to ensure that we engage everyone in the task. Civil society organisations, central and local government, schools, colleges, universities, young people and Members all have their part to play. A series of resources will be tailored for specific audiences. For example, there will

be a free National Democracy Week pack to help plan and publicise activities and the website will provide further support. Hon. Members will be able to download materials as part of the celebrations. There will be a parliamentarian pack to help MPs to connect with, and inspire, young people, and a schools resource pack with a specific focus on the suffrage movement at secondary school level. There will be a programme of democracy ambassadors—young advocates recruited to inspire their peers to champion democratic participation—and a youth digital campaign to support the promotion and recruitment of democracy ambassadors among young people aged between 13 and 16.

I once again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood for calling this debate on a very important issue.

Chris Skidmore: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive update on the content of National Democracy Week. I am sure that democratic society and civil society groups will welcome the news she has announced. I welcome the fact that we have had Members here from Cornwall, Perthshire, Suffolk, Merseyside and Liverpool—all corners of the United Kingdom—providing representation and demonstrating that there is a truly national interest in National Democracy Week.

Chloe Smith: I again echo that point about the breadth of the work across our whole Union. There is an opportunity for all parts of our United Kingdom to celebrate our democracy and its preciousness, and the opportunities for more people to take their role and have a voice in it.

I welcome further ideas for National Democracy Week from any hon. Member or any Member of the other place. After all, we have the privilege of standing here as part of our democracy—we are proud to do so—but by extension it falls to us to help others to do the same. I welcome thoughts from hon. Members on anything I have said, so that together we can go further and encourage more people to take their place in this country's democracy.

Question put and agreed to.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The school bell has rung and we can start the next important debate early.

A-Level Provision: Knowsley Metropolitan Borough

4.27 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered A-Level provision in Knowsley Metropolitan Borough.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am pleased to welcome all my fellow Knowsley metropolitan borough MPs to the debate, plus others from nearby who clearly have an interest in education. I also welcome the Minister, who has a long-standing interest in the matter. Indeed, I think we first had a meeting with him on this very issue sometime in June 2016. The matter is therefore not recent; it has concerned my colleagues and I—and, I hope and believe, the Department—for well over two years.

Knowsley is now the only sizeable English metropolitan authority that does not have A-level provision within its borders. It is a matter of some disgrace that young people living in such a large borough, with such a large urban population, cannot take A-levels within the boundaries of the authority. Those who wish to do so—and many do—have to leave the borough. That is not good, and it should not persist any longer than it has to. Indeed, only two other English authorities that have some responsibility for education have no A-level provision within their borders: the Isle of Wight, which has its own issues as an island, and the City of London, which does not have that many residents.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): In Carmel College, 400 pupils—just under 25%—come from Knowsley. That is exactly the same position as two years ago.

Maria Eagle: My hon. Friend has dug out some interesting numbers from Carmel College, a sixth-form college in St Helens. It is some miles away from Knowsley. It is fair to say that it is not the easiest place to get to. It is on the edge of the green belt on the edge of St Helens. If I had to get there without my car, it would not be immediately obvious to me how to do that. For young people from Knowsley or Halewood—the part of Knowsley in my constituency—having to go to that college presents significant extra difficulties, costs and barriers to their ability to take up A-levels.

Halewood Academy sixth form was closed in the summer of 2017. The closure had been mooted from the previous spring. That was when my colleagues and I first sought meetings with Ministers in the Department. The Minister here today first met with us about the issue back in May or June 2016. The sixth form closed, notwithstanding the fact that it left the entire borough without A-level provision within its borders. Any young people who did well in their GCSEs at Halewood Academy were then required to leave the borough to take up A-levels and post-16 education. It is not acceptable for young people anywhere to have to do that, particularly not when those born in Knowsley begin life with greater disadvantages than most pupils who might go on to study A-levels and post-16 education.

Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council is second on the list of most deprived local authority areas on the indices of multiple deprivation, with 45% of its

[*Maria Eagle*]

neighbourhoods in the highly deprived category. Despite many efforts by Governments of all persuasions, it has a long-standing history of educational under-attainment. The Government have had initiatives—not enough in my view—that have led to extra support going to Knowsley. Previous Labour Governments of which I was a member also had many initiatives, including building new schools and new educational establishments. None of those things has thus far resulted in educational attainment being sufficiently improved. It has gone up and it has gone down, but it has consistently been below average, and that is still the case.

Knowsley is precisely the kind of place where we need to ensure that educational opportunities are available and present in every community. They need to be easily accessible. We should encourage young people who have the potential—many do—to study post-16. In particular, we should encourage them to do academic A-levels, which provide such an excellent route into better chances in life educationally, such as going on to higher education and university in the traditional way. It also offers job opportunities and economic activity that can lead to prosperity later in life. Knowsley is just the kind of place where A-levels need to be accessed by as many people as possible. It is not the kind of place where that opportunity should be difficult to access.

There have been some improvements over the past year, for which I congratulate schools, but Knowsley's performance is currently among the worst on some educational attainment measures at GCSE. It is still below average, although things have improved over the past year on the attainment 8 measure, which is the one that is often cited. Good education is a right for all in a civilised society, no matter the circumstances of birth of an individual. We should judge ourselves as a nation and as a society on whether we can ensure that people born in Knowsley—with all the disadvantages that that often carries with it and implies—have just as much chance of meeting their potential in education and life as anyone born with greater advantages living elsewhere.

In addition to that being the right thing to do—in their rhetoric, the Government say they wish to do it—it is the key to the future economic prosperity of the English regions, such as Merseyside and the wider north-west. Our success as a region absolutely depends on us having available a highly educated workforce and developing the full potential of all our children and young people academically and economically. If we do not manage to do so, it is very likely that our area and region will fall further behind some of the other regions in our nation that manage to fully develop the potential of their young people.

Doing A-levels and going through the academic route on to university is one tried and trusted method by which those born with disadvantages in life can meet their potential academically and economically. That improves social mobility in our communities, our region and our society more generally, helping to improve the economy of the nation as a whole. It is for that reason, among others, that I am particularly concerned about what has been happening with post-16 education in Knowsley. I fear that the Government are not doing as well on that measure as I wish they would and as I hope they wish they would. They are inadvertently letting down my constituents who live in Halewood.

The Government's approach to these matters fails because it unfortunately has no analysis of the impact of deprivation on educational attainment and no analysis of the disadvantage that results. As a consequence, Government educational policy does not seek in practice—it often does so rhetorically—to counteract disadvantage. It simply assesses numbers and standards and applies money on the basis of numbers and judges on the basis of standards. While that is one way of doing things, it does not do the job in an area such as Knowsley, which has deep-seated and long-standing issues with disadvantage and educational attainment.

As the Minister well knows, my colleagues and I have been raising this issue since March 2016, when I wrote to the then Secretary of State for Education, the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan). In addition, I have had a number of meetings with Ministers in the past two years, usually attended by my colleagues. There has been a dizzying array of Ministers before us—it has been like a merry-go-round—although I am very pleased that the Minister with us today is still in his post. His memory reaches back to those early meetings, so he knows how seriously local representatives have taken this matter. I know how seriously he takes his responsibilities, and I am glad he is answering the debate today.

I do not think I am misrepresenting the Government if I say that they accepted from an early stage in the meetings that the current situation—having no A-level provision within the borders of an entire metropolitan borough—is unacceptable and unsustainable. At a meeting a year ago with Lord Nash, who was then one of the Minister's colleagues, we were promised that a new and excellent provider would be brought into Knowsley to restore academic A-level provision and that capital money would be provided to facilitate that if necessary. Since that time, I think the Department has backtracked from that commitment. It has supported reintroducing A-level provision, possibly including some academic A-levels, through the merger of Knowsley Community College and St Helens College at the Stockbridge Lane site in Huyton. I understand that that will happen; such a merger was on the cards anyway.

We have also been told, following an assessment by the Education Funding Agency, that there is no need for any new provision on the basis of its usual criteria. My right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth), my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) and I could have told the Ministers responsible that anyway. Indeed, we did tell them in meetings that the situation does not fit into the Education Funding Agency's usual criteria for providing extra support and provision, because the issue is not that there has been a sudden boost in population or increase in the number of people wanting to study A-levels in the borough. The issue is that the available provision has simply disappeared, been closed and been taken elsewhere, for various reasons none of which has to do with the situations of the students and potential students themselves.

The situation was therefore never likely to fit the usual criteria that the Education Funding Agency applies, and I do not believe that it was particularly useful to go through that process, although of course the local authority did so, along with officials in the Education Funding Agency. Surprise, surprise, it decided that there was no

real need for new provision. That was not what we had been promised in the meeting with Lord Nash. We were promised the introduction of an excellent provider, so that A-level provision, including academic A-level provision, could be brought back within the borough boundaries and expanded.

Let me be clear: I welcome the new provision being introduced as a consequence of the merger of Knowsley Community College and St Helens College. It is an entirely good thing that that will be available, but I worry about the extent to which it will solve the problem, for a number of reasons. I understand from parliamentary answers from December, and from the college itself, that there have been 113 applications so far for the new provision mooted at the merged college, and that a set of 21 subjects, including some academic A-levels, might be available in the curriculum of the new merged college. No one can really enlighten me—perhaps the Minister might be able to in his reply, or subsequently—about whether all 21 subjects will be run, or whether that depends on how many people apply; it would be unusual for the subjects to be run regardless of how many people do so.

Ms Rimmer: The advice is that there has been an impressive number of applications so far, suggesting significant aspiration among school leavers in Knowsley to study A-levels, and an offer of 21 subjects, many of them A-levels. Is my hon. Friend concerned that people may be applying thinking that everything they want to do will definitely be on offer?

Maria Eagle: I think if one looks at a curriculum and is given 21 subjects to choose from, it would not be unusual to expect that, if one chooses a course, it will be run. However, it is not clear to me that they will be. When I asked the chief executive at the college about that, I was told that

“the number of subjects that will run will of course depend on demand.”

I was not told what the minimum number of pupils is that will guarantee that one of the A-levels on offer will be run. As far as I can see, there is no guarantee that any of the courses will be run from September of this year. We hope that they all will be, but I can see no guarantee of that in the answers that I have received, nor have I had any indication of what the minimum number of pupils required will be to ensure that a course is run.

When I was at school, which admittedly was a very long time ago now, I was told at my local comprehensive that I could choose any A-level subject and the school would put it on, which is indeed what happened. We are not in that game any more, unfortunately. I do not know how many or how few people have to apply for A-level English language, or A-level politics for that matter, for that course to be run. I also do not know whether that course, if and when it is run, will be run at the Knowsley site in Huyton, because St Helens College has links elsewhere. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston has already referred to the so-called partnership plan with Carmel College, which is a long way outside the Knowsley borough boundaries.

The provision is welcome, and I do not wish to sound churlish, but if it results in no opportunity for local young people over the age of 16 to study academic A-levels and other A-levels within the borough boundaries,

we have not moved any further. My difficulty is that it is harder for young people born and brought up in Knowsley, owing to their educational disadvantage, family circumstances and deprivation, to do A-levels than it is for people with a more advantaged family background. Such people may have had a more advantaged upbringing, more of an understanding in their family of the value of academic study, and a more supportive environment at home. It is easier for young people in those circumstances to take on and do A-levels than it is for young people examining their options in Knowsley.

It is doubly difficult if doing A-levels and academic A-levels means an additional cost of getting to college, or the additional barrier of having to get to this or that campus, five to 20 miles away. That can make the difference between a young person taking on the A-level study or not. When there is disadvantage already, having that additional barrier makes it much less likely that a young person will take up the A-level provision available. I fear that the double disadvantage that faces young people in deprived areas puts more people off studying than would be the case if they could just go to the sixth form in their local school. Those who take that option end up having to leave the borough, and even that has the additional barriers I mentioned of extra cost and time. They may also have to travel in a way that is not easy, perhaps if the family does not have a car or if the bus routes are not very good and do not go frequently to the place where A-levels can be studied.

To the credit of St Helens and the merged college, and Knowsley Community College, they have put on a bus that will take young people from my constituency to the site in Huyton. The Minister knows that we have geographical challenges in Knowsley because of the shape of the borough and the fact that there are three very distinct centres of population, none of which is particularly well served by buses running between them, which presents practical difficulties.

A bus is to be put on, but a young person from Halewood would have to get on that bus at 7.25 in the morning in order to get to the site in Huyton more than an hour later, going around the houses and through most bits of Liverpool on the way—the congested bits, I noticed, looking at the route—and would not get back to the pick-up point in Halewood until 10 to six. As the Minister knows, A-level studies are not eight hours of lessons every day. If someone has to get on a bus at 7.25 and does not get home till 10 to six, with perhaps one or two hours of study on site, that is not a tremendously practical way to convince a young person to think that it is a good option. What else might the Department and the Minister do to deal with that additional barrier—that extra disadvantage of having to wait for a bus, which is free—that young people from my bit of Knowsley and Halewood have in getting to the site in Huyton, if the A-levels are all to be taught there?

How many young people in Huyton will simply decide that there is some option other than A-levels that they will do instead? How many will decide that A-levels are not for them? What is the consequence of that over time? It makes it look like young people and communities such as Halewood are not interested in higher education or in post-16 studies that lead to job and economic opportunities in later life that might help their social mobility. That is not a good thing and will not tackle the ingrained disadvantage I have been talking about.

[Maria Eagle]

The relative widening of the gap between the educational opportunities available to those who are better off in areas that are better off, and those who are not, is a great worry for the future of social mobility in our society, and for economic opportunity. Analysis by the Centre for Cities has shown a widening gap in educational opportunities between northern and southern cities. Places with the weakest economies have less access to quality higher education, which compounds existing economic divides and makes them grow.

The Government recognise that trend because they introduced opportunity areas to try to counteract precisely that effect by supporting better educational provision. Inexplicably, they have not awarded that status to Knowsley. Inexplicably, Knowsley metropolitan borough was so far down the list on the criteria that I do not see how it could have been awarded that status. I would suggest to the Minister that there might be something wrong with the criteria. If a borough such as Knowsley does not come out pretty high up on that kind of measure, I do not understand the criteria.

Nothing I am saying should be taken as critical of the local authority, which literally has almost no levers left to pull in respect of secondary schooling in Knowsley. There are no directly controlled local authority maintained secondary schools, only academies or church schools. All of them are part of multi-academy trusts based outside the borough. The only thing that the authority can do is try to persuade and cajole. They have no power or levers to pull. The Minister knows that financial imperatives apply to multi-academy trusts and academies that give them little leeway to do things in the interests of local communities—that might cost money that the academy wishes to use for something else.

I am also not criticising Halewood Academy. Once it was forced into academisation by a bad Ofsted, it had no option but to close its sixth form for financial reasons, no matter what the consequences for the almost 100 pupils who were studying for A-levels at the time. Since that unfortunate event, it has taken welcome strides towards improving its GCSE results, which I welcome very much. Pupils, teachers and governors have worked very hard at that school, and I congratulate them on their work and the progress they have made.

Knowsley borough council is implementing a local deal for improving access to A-levels, along with its partner organisations; trying to improve links between primary and secondary schools; celebrating and highlighting school achievements; and trying to boost mentoring programmes and other useful and worthy initiatives. But let us be honest: they are tinkering at the edges of a major problem in educational opportunities faced by our communities. The council no longer has the power to intervene as directly as it once did.

I have a few questions for the Minister, and would ask for a response, if not today, later, if he needs a bit more time to consider them. Will he guarantee that academic A-levels will be taught within the borough boundaries from September this year, as a consequence of the merger between Knowsley Community College and St Helens College? What is the minimum number of people accepted on a course for it to be run, rather than for it to be on the curriculum but not actually taught, and for us to be told that not enough people have applied? Will the Minister guarantee that candidates

will not be expected to travel to additional sites to do their courses if they accept places at the Knowsley Community College site, because some of the sites they would have to travel to are a long way away, which would present another difficulty for those pupils?

Perhaps the Minister will enlighten us about what the partnership with Carmel College consists of and its implications. If people will have to travel to that site, that does not put us in a different position to the current one in terms of A-level provision within the borough boundaries.

Will the Minister tell us what extra money the Government are putting in to assist in solving the ongoing problems with A-level provision in Knowsley? I have set out some of the additional challenges and disadvantages. Given that Knowsley did not fit the criteria for opportunity areas, perhaps the Minister will tell us what additional support his Department can give.

What plans does he have to recognise deprivation and educational disadvantage in the way he funds post-16 provision? It worries me that the problem we have in Knowsley now might be something that we see in other areas, such as the south Liverpool part of my constituency. We are already seeing newly built schools closing because they had a bad Ofsted, and other newly built schools being forced into academisation—it is not clear who the sponsors will be and what will happen to their sixth forms. I fear that, because of how the Department funds post-16 education, where standards tie in with forced academisation, for example, and the financial imperatives on academies, we may, over time, see developing deserts of post-16 opportunity in places that are already blighted by disadvantage. A number of our sixth forms and newly built schools will be forced to close because of the interaction between standards and numbers at post-16, leading to the closure of provision, which can be even more detrimental for areas already disadvantaged in accessing opportunity.

I am not convinced that the Department and the Government's policy goes far enough to understand, recognise and do something about entrenched disadvantage and the lack of educational attainment. Instead, it looks simply at standards and numbers. An area such as Knowsley will never be advantaged if one looks simply at standards and numbers, because of the existing long-standing disadvantage. That is quite enough from me, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's reply.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can last until 5.30 pm. I have to call the Front-Bench spokesman for the Opposition at 5.7 pm. Until then, George Howarth, the time is yours.

5 pm

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) on securing this important debate on an issue that we have been concerned about, as she rightly said, for several years.

I recall that during the meeting with Lord Nash in, I think, July 2016, to which my hon. Friend referred, I suggested that what was then Knowsley Community College—it is now the merged St Helens and Knowsley

Community College—should be the provider. The then Minister and his officials were very negative about the potential for that to happen. It therefore came as something of a surprise, although a pleasant one, when it was announced last year that the new A-level provision based in north Huyton in my constituency would indeed be the merged St Helens and Knowsley Community College. As my hon. Friend said, the intention at the time appeared to be to look for a provider with a strong track record in A-level provision—not necessarily in Knowsley or even Liverpool, but further afield than Knowsley. I do not want to mislead anybody. Like my hon. Friend, I am delighted that from next September there will be A-level provision at the college, but there seems to have been a change that nobody has ever explained to us between the initial meeting in July 2016 and what eventually happened.

I will be brief, because we are short of time. I welcome the fact that there will be 21 A-level subjects on offer, linked up with other qualifications, and that, as my hon. Friend said, there will be a wide range of subjects, including English literature, English language, mathematics and more specialist subjects such as politics, product design and computer science. Offering those subjects is a good step forward, although they will be not necessarily pure A-level courses but a combination of BTEC and A-levels.

I welcome the fact that there is a three-year commitment to the proposal because, given what I am about to say about the problems confronting the college, it will take three years. I also welcome the fact that, because of issues relating to Knowsley's geography which we have talked about all along, there will be free transport arrangements, including from Halewood and Kirkby in my constituency, which will enable students to travel to the centre of the borough. Hopefully, that inducement will enable them to overcome what my hon. Friend described as insurmountable travel problems.

I want to point out something that is not generally known, which is that it is not quite true that there is no A-level provision anywhere else in Knowsley. I visited All Saints Catholic High School in my constituency last Friday, and I met a group of students—10 young women in year 11—called the scholars group. Some of them will stay on at the school to do a combination of A-level and BTEC courses. Admittedly, only the art, graphics and textiles A-level is on offer, in addition to which there are BTEC courses in business, health and social care, science, sport and performing arts. It is a relatively small sixth form, and it offers a narrow range of options.

I was very encouraged to meet those young women, together with the headteacher, and to find out what they felt about the offer that the college is putting forward. Interestingly—this is a challenge for the new arrangements—not one of those 10 young women intends to study A-levels at the newly established A-level academy in north Huyton. They intend to go to Carmel College, which as we have already heard will be part of the arrangements, although we are not clear exactly how, and to Winstanley College in Wigan—that may seem strange, but there is a connection between some schools in Kirkby and Winstanley College, and some young people are prepared to travel that far to get a good course. A couple of them hope to go to a fee-paying school—Merchant Taylors' in Crosby, which is in Sefton—on a scholarship.

The challenge for the new college—I hope the Minister will think about how the Government might support it in this—is that the young people in year 11 have already made decisions about where they want to go, and they are understandably choosing to go to colleges that have a good track record in A-levels. That is something we need to address if those young people decide in the end to go to the college. There are a lot of advantages to the offer, and I hope that a lot of young people will take it up—we have heard that there is a lot of interest already—but I think it will take three years, which is what the plan is, before it is established on a proper footing.

5.7 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) on securing this debate. She started with the principle that good education is a right for all. That should happen everywhere—not just in areas of advantage, but in areas of disadvantage. She succinctly outlined the issues facing young people in her borough, where 45% of young people grow up in some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the UK. My right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) has championed this issue for a number of years. They are MPs looking for a solution for the common good. They are not just critical of Government policy; they want to do the best for their borough. He gave some extraordinarily powerful testimony about the young people studying at All Saints and talked about what their future might look like.

My hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood rightly talked about the gap between the north and the south. Evidence from Government reviews shows that, if we draw a line from the Humber estuary to the Mersey estuary, the number of children getting five good GCSEs is about 34%. In London, the previous Labour Government and the London challenge brought the number there right up so that nowadays 50% of children receiving free school meals in London achieve five good GCSEs or more. That gap needs to be challenged. It is not just me and the Labour party saying that. The former chief inspector of Ofsted, Sir Michael Wilshaw, said that

“the people of Liverpool, Manchester and the north are not being treated fairly—that their children have less of a chance of educational success than people south of the Wash.”

I do not want to talk about my constituency—although there is good provision in my city, it is being centralised to locations many miles away in certain colleges. My hon. Friend said that we are creating deserts of post-16 education in the poorest areas. That is probably the quote for today.

The further education sector educates more than 4 million people a year in England, with students shared between mandatory education and university, including those going back to education in later life. Under the coalition Government, spending on further education in sixth forms fell by 14% in real terms. Core funding is only protected in cash terms up to 2019-20. At the end of the spending review period in '19-'20, the Institute for Fiscal Studies expects that the spending per student in further education will be just above the level 30 years ago, at the end of the 1980s.

[Mike Kane]

Since 2010, the sector has faced sustained budget cuts amounting to 14% in real terms. That has had a number of serious consequences for the provision of further education, from a sharp rise in the number of providers facing a financial crisis to many reducing the number of courses they have to offer or, as in Knowsley, courses going altogether. Between 2010-11 and 2016-17, spending on 16-to-19 education fell by 17.5% in real terms.

On A-levels, as our Front-Bench team under my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) have raised time and time again, the funding that sixth-form colleges, schools and academies now receive to educate sixth formers covers the cost of delivering three A-level or equivalent qualifications and little more. According to the Sixth Form Colleges Association, the average annual funding received by sixth-form colleges and school or academy sixth forms is now only £4,531 per student. That is 21% less than the funding received to educate younger students in secondary schools, 48% less than the average university tuition fee and 70% less than the average sixth-form fee in the independent sector.

In March 2017, plans were announced to increase investment in 16-to-19 education for students studying technical courses in further education colleges. That will have no impact on the vast majority of students in sixth-form colleges, or school or academy sixth forms, as they are primarily studying academic qualifications such as A-levels.

To come back to the Knowsley situation, the essence of what has been raised today involves six secondary schools in the borough, four of which have been academised. The Gove reforms introduced by the former Education Secretary threw the sector up into the air and brought it down so that there is now little chance of local elements changing the dynamic in their boroughs, because we have lost the principle of subsidiarity in education that was enshrined by Ellen Wilkinson, the first Labour Minister of Education in '45, when she implemented the Butler Act.

Local leaders can do very little now. Michael Wilshaw has said that he wants to see MPs, such as the MPs present today, leading the charge for higher standards and better education, but there is little that they, local leaders or even elected city-wide Mayors or council leaders can do nowadays, because the power has been brought back to Whitehall. As we have seen, however, Whitehall cannot run 24,000 schools from the centre.

Mr Howarth: As my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood rightly said, Knowsley as a local borough council does not have a great deal of purchase in the situation, but it is worth placing on record the support we did get from the local authority and its officers with the Department to bring that about.

Mike Kane: I too praise Knowsley for all it is trying to do to get the best provision. It now has no hand in four of its schools, although it has soft power, and its direct influence is on only the two Roman Catholic schools, which are yet to be academised. They are all working as hard as they can with the Archdiocese of Liverpool.

I will finish as I began with what Michael Wilshaw, the outgoing head of Ofsted, talked about. He warned that any attempts to achieve a geographic rebalancing of the British economy would be fatally undermined if children in the north of England could not be better educated. We cannot leave the education of our young people to chance, under a veil of ignorance, just because the place they are born and brought up in has differential levels of education. My hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood is right: education is a right for all our young people, no matter where they are born and brought up or what their social circumstances are. The Government must remember that in their response today.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): If the Minister finishes his remarks no later than 5.27 pm that will give Maria Eagle up to three minutes to wind up the debate.

5.15 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Thank you, Mr Hollobone. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) on securing this debate.

I have had a long-standing interest in educational standards in Knowsley and have had a number of meetings about A-level provision in the borough over the years since 2016. It saddened and concerned me when the decision was taken that Halewood Academy should close its A-level provision. I will come to why that decision was taken by the academy, but we sought to reintroduce A-level provision to Knowsley. I share the ambition of the hon. Lady and other Members present to ensure sixth-form or college provision within the borough where students may study A-levels.

I also share hon. Members' concerns about general educational standards in Knowsley, which incidentally predate the Gove reforms and academisation. In fact, academisation and the major reforms introduced since 2010 are a response to poor academic standards in Knowsley and other parts of the country. That is why we are so determined to raise standards across the borough. Knowsley is too often on the list of the lowest performing education authorities that I pore over when the results come out. The phonics results, for example, show that in Knowsley primary schools, 78% of six-year-olds reach the expected standards, compared with 81% nationally and significantly higher rates still in parts of the country such as Newham, which also serves many disadvantaged areas but considerably exceeds the national average.

The Government's ambition is to ensure that all pupils, wherever they live and regardless of their background, receive an education that takes them as far as their talents will allow. Standards have risen in our schools since 2010. As a result of the reforms referred to by the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), 1.9 million more pupils are now in good or outstanding schools, the proportion of pupils studying two or more science GCSEs has risen from 63% to 91%, and the proportion of pupils taking the EBacc suite of GCSEs has risen from just over one fifth to nearly two fifths. At the same time, the attainment gap index has shrunk by 10% since 2011 and more pupils are now being entered for science and maths A-levels than ever before.

The Government have embarked on an ambitious reform of A-levels to ensure that our young people are prepared for the demands of this country's world-leading universities. The Government are determined to extend those opportunities to all parts of the country, and the Department has been working closely, as I have personally, with Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council to ensure that young people in Knowsley receive the high-quality education that they deserve and that they benefit from the Government's reforms.

In April 2016, following a wide consultation, the principal of Halewood Academy announced that it would stop admitting pupils for A-level study from September 2016. There was low demand for A-levels at the school, with only 58 pupils studying for A-levels at the time of the announcement, and the school was struggling to be financially viable, as well as delivering poor-quality education. Its position would likely have continued to deteriorate because of the declining number of 16 to 18-year-olds in Knowsley, which is set to reduce by 17% between 2015 and 2020. As a result, pupils in Knowsley deciding to pursue A-levels would need to travel to nearby boroughs, where there is a breadth of choice at colleges with established reputations for high-quality provision, such as Carmel College in St Helens, which the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood referred to, and Riverside College in Halton.

The need for A-level provision in Knowsley was kept under review by the local regional schools commissioner, and in June 2016 it was agreed that the RSC would work with the Educational Skills Funding Agency, the local authority and other local schools and colleges to improve post-16 provision. That would take into account the recommendations of the area review of post-16 provision in the Liverpool city region taking place at the time. Those reviews are designed to avoid the very gaps in provision that the hon. Lady is concerned about.

Along with the ESFA, the local authority's executive director for children has been in discussion with Knowsley Community College, local headteachers, local businesses and outstanding local schools located outside the borough. The Department has continued to work with the borough's director of children's services to keep the demand for A-level provision under review. Following the area review recommendation for St Helen's College and Knowsley Community College to merge, the Department ensured that A-level provision will be delivered at the Knowsley campus from September this year. The merged college's published 2018-19 prospectus sets out a comprehensive A-level offer, with 21 different A-levels available. As the hon. Lady correctly stated, to date it has received 113 A-level applications for the 2018-19 academic year, and it is reviewing these in order to make an appropriate offer to each candidate, as in some cases pupils will undertake both A-Levels and vocational options, as is the case in many sixth-form colleges.

As well as ensuring future A-level provision in Knowsley, the Department has taken steps to address the historical educational under-achievement that has blighted the life chances of pupils in parts of Knowsley for too long. There have been—and still are—long-standing issues with the quality of secondary provision. That is why we are working closely with a number of organisations, including the Knowsley education commission, the Institute for Teaching, The Brilliant Club, Teach First and the local authority, to ensure an improvement in the quality of education in the borough. Knowsley Council has

commissioned the development and implementation of Knowsley Better Together, which is a wider local plan to improve opportunities for pupils to study A-levels in Knowsley. This recognises the need for future A-level provision and, importantly, the need to improve schools' performance at key stage 4 to prepare students for the demands of the new rigorous A-levels.

A range of targeted interventions have been put in place for academies in Knowsley, including the regional schools commissioner meeting the multi-academy trust responsible for these academies during the first term of this academic year, to ensure that rapid and sustained improvements are made. The Department will continue to monitor progress and work closely with the academies in Knowsley to address the quality of education at secondary level. I am very happy to make a commitment to meet regularly all the Members in the area who are concerned, together with the local authority and the regional schools commissioner, to maintain progress both in the secondary schools and in the primary schools in the borough. I have been doing this in a number of other local authority areas where I am concerned about standards. We can go school by school, including primary schools, to monitor what is happening and ensure that progress continues to be made.

I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood for highlighting these issues. The Department will continue to work with the borough's director of children's services and other appropriate parties to ensure that A-level provision in Knowsley meets the demands and needs of its pupils. Significant work is under way to raise standards in Knowsley's schools and to prepare pupils for A-level study. I will work with the hon. Lady and keep these issues under review.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of opportunity areas. There are 12 to begin with, and we want to ensure that they represent different parts of the country—rural, coastal, north-west and so on. Given that there is an opportunity area in Oldham, it was felt that Knowsley would not be an opportunity area at this point. We will learn from what has been happening in those opportunity areas, so that we can apply the lessons learnt to other parts of the country that are low down on the Social Mobility Commission's index in due course.

On that note, I hope that the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood is happy with my response. I repeat: I am very happy and keen to work with right hon. and hon. Members to make sure that we are monitoring and doing everything we can to ensure that standards at both secondary and primary schools in the Knowsley area and the borough continue to rise, so that there is more possibility of 11-to-16 schools having sixth-form provision in future.

5.24 pm

Maria Eagle: I thank the Minister for his response, the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), for his contribution, and my colleagues for their support and contributions. I know that the Minister understands that this issue matters a great deal to those of us who have the honour of representing communities in Knowsley. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth), my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) and

[Maria Eagle]

I will want to take him up on his offer of regularly reviewing the progress of schools and provision in Knowsley.

I am also sure that, although we wish schools well, we will want to look closely at what happens between now and September, to see how many young people apply for the new provision and what it means in practice, in terms of what A-levels are put on and how many people it takes to ensure that a particular course is run. Only by meeting the needs of pupils as they consider their future and ensuring that they can maximise their potential in life—their academic potential, as well as their economic potential later in life—can areas such as Knowsley hope to improve their economies and social mobility for the families in their communities, many of which are deprived, and in due course achieve a better future for all.

I thank everyone for coming along to the debate. We local representatives are not willing to let this matter pass. I welcome the Minister's interest and I hope that, between us all, we can ensure that improvements in provision in Knowsley do not stop here, that there is no backsliding into an unacceptable position and that in due course all our young people can indeed take all the opportunities available to them to progress post-16 in education and in life.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered A-level provision in Knowsley Metropolitan Borough.

5.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.

339WH

*A-Level Provision: Knowsley
Metropolitan Borough*

27 FEBRUARY 2018

*A-Level Provision: Knowsley
Metropolitan Borough*

340WH

Written Statements

Tuesday 27 February 2018

TREASURY

Banking Act 2009 Reporting

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

The Treasury has laid before the House of Commons a report required under section 231 of the Banking Act 2009 covering the period from 1 April 2017 to 30 September 2017. Copies of the document are available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS494]

DEFENCE

Armed Forces Pay Review Body

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson):

I am pleased to announce that the Prime Minister has invited Mr John Steele to continue to serve as Chair of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body for a further two-month term of office, commencing on 1 March 2018. This allows Mr Steele to draw pay round 18 to a conclusion.

I would also like to take this opportunity to announce that the Prime Minister has appointed Mr Peter Maddison as the next Chair of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body. His appointment will commence on 1 March 2018 and run until 28 February 2021.

Both the extension and the appointment have been conducted in accordance with the guidance of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

[HCWS487]

Military Field Hospitals: Civilian Casualties

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson):

In all combat operations the Ministry of Defence does everything it can to minimise the risk to civilians through our rigorous targeting processes and the professionalism of the armed forces. We recognise, however, that there is always the risk of inadvertent civilian casualties, particularly in complex and congested urban environments.

The Ministry of Defence places a significant value on the preservation of life, both to our own forces and also to civilians. When a field hospital is deployed in support of either combat or humanitarian operations, our armed forces regularly and indiscriminately treat civilian cases, to save life, limb or eyesight. This lifesaving work deserves to be acknowledged.

Recognising the important work being done by a number of UK-registered charities, including Every Casualty Worldwide, Save the Children, and AirWars, to ensure that all lives lost to armed violence anywhere in the world are properly recorded, the Ministry of Defence is making a commitment to increase transparency by publishing the number of all civilians admitted to UK military field hospitals. This information will detail the following:

Type of civilian (e.g. UK civilian, local civilian, detainees. The split by type of civilian varies depending on the nature of the operation)

Casualty type (e.g. battle injury, non-battle injury, disease/natural causes)

Disposal (e.g. death in hospital, discharged home, discharged to another hospital)

The information provided will be counts of casualties and not details of individuals (names etc.).

The Ministry of Defence hopes that the release of this information will provide the public with an informed picture of the efforts the UK Government take while undertaking operations to provide urgent medical care to civilians.

[HCWS492]

Reserve Forces and Cadets Associations

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson):

I have today placed in the Library of the House a copy of the Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Associations (RFCAs) combined annual report and accounts for 2016/17. I am very grateful to the RFCAs for their valuable work in support of the Reserve Forces and Cadet organisations.

[HCWS491]

EDUCATION

Mathematics and English: Subject Content

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne

Milton): Functional skills are qualifications that enable people to develop and demonstrate a good standard of mathematics and English for success in life and work. They are an important part of education provision, particularly for students over the age of 16, apprentices and adults seeking to retrain and improve their skills later in life. The Government are reforming these qualifications to make sure that they give people the best possible preparation for employment, further study and everyday life. We also want new functional skills qualifications to provide employers with a reliable measure of students' skills, knowledge and achievement.

As part of these reforms, today I am publishing revised subject content for mathematics and English functional skills qualifications. This follows extensive engagement with employers, teachers, subject specialists, and a public consultation which ran from the 12 September to the 7 November 2017.

The new content includes the skills employers tell us they need in their workforce and sets out the learning aims, requirements and standards of each functional skills qualification, moving from entry level 1 to 3 up to levels 1 and 2. Functional skills level 2 is currently accepted as a completion requirement for level 3 apprenticeships and higher, as an alternative option to a GCSE standard pass. Across all levels in both subjects we have improved how students learn to read, write, communicate, use numbers, measures, handle mathematical information and solve problems. In English, by level 2, students are required to read, write and communicate using straightforward and complex instructive, descriptive, explanatory and persuasive texts on a range of technical and non-technical topics. In mathematics, by level 2, students are required to use numbers of any size and form, including ratios, fractions, decimals and percentages, construct, interpret and handle a range of statistical information and data, and use their knowledge and skills to obtain solutions to complex problems.

The new content will be taught from September 2019. These changes aim to ensure that people have the opportunity to develop and demonstrate their mathematics and English skills through accessible, practical, rigorous and well-respected qualifications.

The mathematics and English functional skills subject content documents, the Government's response to the consultation and the equality impact assessment can be viewed online as attachments: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2018-02-27/HCWS490/>

[HCWS490]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Farming and our Countryside

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): I am publishing today the first consultation on a wholly domestic agriculture policy in nearly half a century. "Health and Harmony: The future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit" sets out our ambitions for farming in England and seeks the views of all readers on its proposals.

Leaving the European Union marks an unprecedented opportunity for fundamental reform of agriculture in the United Kingdom. The farmed environment is a source of food that nourishes the body and a landscape that nourishes the soul. We want an agricultural policy that values not only the great British food farmers produce but also the unique public goods that farming, horticulture and forestry provide.

We believe these proposals could work for the whole of the UK, but we recognise that devolution provides each administration with the powers to decide its own priorities. We will continue to work closely with the devolved administrations to establish common frameworks, where these are necessary, in order to enable the functioning of the UK internal market or so that the UK can negotiate, enter into and implement new trade agreements. Overall, it is the Government's expectation that the process will lead to an increase in decision-making powers for each of the devolved administrations.

UK farmers and land managers have operated within the constraints of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for decades. While the CAP has pioneered some of the world's first agri-environment schemes, which have helped to protect our wildlife and habitats, it remains flawed. Paying land owners for the amount of agricultural land they have creates an unjust, inefficient system that can drive perverse outcomes. The bureaucratic structure of the CAP has constrained our ability to deliver genuine improvements to our countryside and natural environment.

We now have an opportunity to transform agricultural policy. Our proposals are underpinned by the ambitions we have set out in the Government's 25-year environment plan, so that we leave the environment in a better state than we found it for future generations. We want to incentivise methods of farming that improve soil health, create new habitats for wildlife, increase biodiversity,

reduce flood risk and better mitigate climate change and improve air quality by reducing agricultural emissions.

Good environmental land management has benefits beyond improving the natural landscape. Human life can be enriched by a deeper connection to our countryside, be it through the air we breathe or access to public footpaths. Farmed animals are also an integral part of our countryside. We have a responsibility to maintain their health and welfare throughout their life and we want to safeguard the welfare of our livestock, building on our existing reputation for world leading standards.

We are proud to have some of the most productive and innovative farmers in the world. Leaving the EU presents a huge opportunity for UK agriculture to increase its competitiveness. This paper proposes various methods by which the industry could achieve this, including developing the next generation of food and farming technology, adopting the latest agronomic techniques, reducing the impact of pests and diseases, investing in skills and equipment, and collaborating with other farmers and processors. We will ensure that in future public money is paid for public goods—principally environmental enhancement, but these could also include improving productivity, providing public access to farmland and the countryside, enhanced welfare standards for livestock and measures to support the resilience of rural and upland communities.

In England, direct payments will continue during an "agricultural transition". So that we can support farmers to prepare for change, we will need to redistribute some existing funds. To do this, we propose to apply reductions to farmers' direct payments, starting with the largest landowners, to free up money to pilot environmental land management schemes and to help farmers unlock their full potential for sustainable production.

We recognise that some sectors may find it more difficult than others to adapt—for example, those located in the most remote, wild and beautiful parts of England. The upland way of life, the unique food produced, and the great art and literature that these landscapes have inspired attract visitors from around the world. In this paper, we ask how these rural communities can be supported for new generations and what the right support should be during the transition and into the future.

For the first time in more than 40 years, the UK will also have its own trade policy. We want to maximise our trade opportunities globally and across all countries—both by boosting our trading relationships with old friends and new allies, and by seeking a deep and special partnership with the EU. We are proud to have some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world. Maintaining and enhancing our high standards of food safety, animal welfare and environmental protection will remain paramount.

We will introduce an Agriculture Bill that moves away from the CAP, providing us with the ability to set out a domestic policy that will stand the test of time.

This consultation marks the exposition of a new settlement for agriculture. As we leave the European Union, this is an historic chance to do something economically sound, socially just, and environmentally essential.

[HCWS488]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): New figures published on Thursday 22 February show that the UK is more than half way towards meeting its commitment to resettle 20,000 people through the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme (VPRS) by 2020.

The latest quarterly Home Office immigration statistics show that 10,538 refugees have been resettled on the VPRS, one of the largest global resettlement programmes, since it began.

The VPRS is just one of the routes by which the UK is helping to resettle refugees. In 2017, a total of 6,212 people were resettled in the UK—a 19% increase on 2016—with 4,832 of these people coming through the VPRS. Five hundred and thirty nine people arrived under the vulnerable children's resettlement scheme (VCRS) which will resettle up to 3,000 at-risk children and their families from the middle east and north Africa region by 2020. The latest figures take the total number of children that the UK has provided asylum or an alternative form of protection to since the start of 2010 to 28,000.

As a country we can be proud that we are over half way towards honouring our commitment of resettling 20,000 of the most vulnerable refugees who have fled Syria by 2020 so they can rebuild their lives here in safety. Nearly half are children and more people are arriving every month.

The VPRS is a joint scheme between the Home Office, the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

The UK's resettlement schemes are just one of the ways the Government are supporting vulnerable children and adults who have fled danger and conflict. The UK remains the second largest donor in humanitarian assistance and has pledged £2.46 billion in UK aid to Syria and the neighbouring countries, its largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis.

[HCWS493]

Independent Police Complaints Commission

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I am pleased to announce that today my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury and I are publishing the annual report of the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) [HC 798]. Copies of the report have been laid before the House and will be available in the Vote Office.

This is the 13th annual report from the IPCC, covering their work during 2016-17. This period has been pivotal for the IPCC as they prepare for their transition to the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) headed by a director general and unitary board set out in the Policing and Crime Act 2017. They have continued to increase the numbers of independent cases they take on (590) and complete (496) while maintaining the average time to complete cases at around 11 months. A major milestone was reached with the Hillsborough investigation, when following referral to the CPS, six people were subsequently charged.

As well as covering the police, the annual report also includes a section on the discharge of their responsibilities in respect of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

[HCWS489]

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