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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Monday 12 March 2018

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Homelessness

2. **Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce homelessness. [904290]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Tackling homelessness and rough sleeping is a key priority for me and my Ministry. That is why we are spending more than £1 billion through to 2020. We are implementing the most ambitious legislative reform in decades—the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017—and we have established the rough sleeping and homelessness reduction taskforce.

Will Quince: The all-party group on ending homelessness recently took evidence on the success of rapid rehousing models in Denmark. What consideration has my right hon. Friend given to the merits of rolling out such programmes alongside the faster and wider roll-out of Housing First in England?

Sajid Javid: May I first pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the important role that he has played as the co-chair of the all-party group on ending homelessness? He is absolutely right to point to international experience when looking at the huge challenge that this country faces. As he knows, Housing First has come from the experience of others, particularly Finland. I thank him for his support.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): The rising level of homelessness in Manchester is the biggest issue that people raise with me on the doorstep and elsewhere. All the good work that we are doing to rehouse people does not matter when there are too many people coming through the system at the other end. What conversations is the Secretary of State having with other Departments, especially the Department for Work and Pensions, about stopping people becoming homeless in the first place? The situation is getting completely out of control.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this issue, which comes up in Manchester and many other parts of the country. She is right to point to the cross-departmental work that is required, including with the Department for Work and Pensions and others,

such as the Ministry of Justice, given the number of offenders who sometimes end up on the streets. The work is being co-ordinated, and the taskforce that the Prime Minister has created is helping to achieve just that.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree with Catherine Street of the Memorial University of Newfoundland that the causes of homelessness and sleeping on the streets are very many and complex, and that this is not just down to a lack of housing? Will my right hon. Friend take the opportunity to go to the west midlands to visit Mayor Andy Street to see the work and initiatives that he is undertaking to prevent the problem?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend mentions two Streets; I agree with him on both. Catherine Street is absolutely right about the complex causes of homelessness, particularly rough sleeping. Andy Street, the Mayor of the west midlands, has really led the way on this, including with the Housing First project.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Exeter has suffered a terrible increase in homelessness and rough sleeping since 2010, although strenuous efforts by its Labour council have led to a reduction in rough sleeping over the past two years. Will the Secretary of State and Government colleagues revisit the decisions to cut supported living and public health grants to local authorities, which fund alcohol and drug treatment programmes, because that is hampering local authorities' attempts to tackle this problem?

Sajid Javid: I am happy to join the right hon. Gentleman in commending the work done in Exeter. We should all try to learn from one another, and councils can learn from each other. It is important that we keep up funding wherever it is necessary to address the causes of addiction, whether that is drug or alcohol addiction. That is why we are providing a total of £1 billion in funding up to 2020, including for a number of projects that are specifically designed to help with addiction problems.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Some 61% of rough sleepers in London are non-UK citizens. What can we do about the importation of homelessness?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to point to the causes of homelessness. Of course, a number of people who sleep on our streets are not from the UK. Everyone deserves help, but we must look carefully at the causes of homelessness. My Department is working carefully and closely with the Home Office to see what more we can do.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): LGBT young people are much more likely than others to become homeless. According to the Albert Kennedy Trust, they account for up to 24% of the young jobless population. What is the Secretary of State doing to address this particular problem?

Sajid Javid: I agree with the hon. Lady that anyone who is homeless, particularly anyone who is sleeping rough, deserves the help of central and local government. We have more than 48 different types of projects in place—many of them are community-led and many are funded directly by the Government—that are designed to reduce the number of people on our streets and those suffering from homelessness.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The last official survey in Cheltenham found nine homeless people, each of whom is a living rebuke to us to do more. Will the Secretary of State join me in thanking all the staff at the P3 charity who are ensuring that the £1 million social impact bond provided by central Government is being used to provide one-to-one support?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I commend the P3 charity for its work. I know that my hon. Friend has taken a lot of interest in this. The Government have helped to fund some eight social impact bonds to help with rough sleeping, including the one in Cheltenham, and they are making a huge difference.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): In Scotland we have some of the strongest rights for homeless people in the world. The Scottish Government's homelessness and rough sleeping action group recently reported, and it has been praised by charities for taking steps in the right direction, including with a £50 million fund to eradicate homelessness. What cognisance are Ministers here taking of the work that is going on in Scotland? Will the Secretary of State look at the group's recommendations?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady rightly emphasises the point about learning from each other. Where Scotland has had success on homelessness and rough sleeping, we shall certainly look into that, and we will seek other examples in the UK. My hon. Friend the Housing Minister is visiting Scotland later this week and will be looking at that particular issue.

Homeowners: Mortgage Costs

3. **David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for homeowners in meeting mortgage costs. [904291]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): One of the best ways in which the Government can support homeowners with their mortgage costs is by ensuring that the economy remains strong and competitive so that employment is high and interest rates are as low as possible.

David Hanson: At the end of this month, the Government are taking away mortgage support from 110,000 people, and only 7,000 so far have applied for the loan that replaces that scheme. What do the Government think that the other 103,000 people are going to do on 2 April?

Sajid Javid: I think that the right hon. Gentleman is referring to the support for mortgage interest policy, on which the DWP leads. The Government are right to strike the right balance between the needs of hard-pressed homeowners and the taxpayer. If he is really interested in helping homeowners, perhaps he can explain to his constituents why he voted against the stamp duty cut that this Government implemented.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The withdrawal of support for mortgage interest came as a bolt from the blue to my constituents who came to see me on Friday. Many thousands like them will struggle

due to the withdrawal of the support and may not wish to take up an additional loan. What options will be open to these people? What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the impact on people who are forced out of a home that they have bought into social rented housing, and of the impact on waiting lists?

Sajid Javid: I think that the hon. Lady misunderstands the policy—at least it certainly seems so, given the way she described it. The Government are not withdrawing support; we are making it fairer and ensuring that it is still available. The support will be loan-based, with a soft loan secured on the individual's property. This also protects the rights of taxpayers, and I would have thought that she would be interested in doing that.

Help To Buy Scheme

4. **Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): What estimate he has made of the profits derived from the Help to Buy scheme by house builders. [904292]

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): The Help to Buy equity loan scheme alone helped 116,000 first-time buyers to get on to the property ladder and stimulated the supply of new housing—both key aims of this Government.

Gareth Thomas: My constituents, some of whom have been on the wrong end of aggressive behaviour by Persimmon, are concerned to know that since Help to Buy was introduced, the biggest private house builders have increased house prices by up to 10%, with almost all of that banked as profit and much of it paid out in senior managers' enormous bonus payments. Should not the Secretary of State and his ministerial colleagues be doing more to tame the aggressive behaviour of developers such as Persimmon, rather than subsidising them through Help to Buy?

Dominic Raab: It is good news that Help to Buy has helped more homes to get built. It has contributed to about 14% of new build since 2015. I personally share some of the hon. Gentleman's concerns about executive pay, but I gently remind him that it was this Government who introduced the corporate governance reforms in August, including to make sure that there is greater transparency and greater shareholder grip over directors' pay.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister will know that some 10% of those on the Help to Buy scheme earn over £80,000 a year. Even in London, they are people who can afford to buy without this taxpayer subsidy. In the light of the Secretary of State's earlier comments about responsibility to the taxpayer, will he contrast the poorest homeowners who will lose help with mortgage interest with these heavily subsidised, well-off people up and down the country?

Dominic Raab: I think that some factual clarification would help the hon. Gentleman, because four out of five of those benefiting from Help to Buy have been first-time buyers, and three out of five households benefiting from Help to Buy had combined incomes of £50,000 or less. We are on their side; it is a shame that Labour is not.

Adult Social Care Funding

5. **Tracy Brabin** (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of projected funding for adult social care until 2020. [904293]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): In addition to the spending review package, the Government provided a further £2 billion for adult social care at last year's Budget and an additional £150 million in the most recent local government finance settlement. As a result, councils will be able to increase spending on adult social care in real terms each year until 2020.

Tracy Brabin: Kirklees Council spends 35% of its budget on adult social care. It has just raised its council tax by 6%, and half of that is ring-fenced to fund social care, but the council will still have to cut tens of millions in the years ahead. So, ahead of tomorrow's spring statement, will the Minister tell us what he has done to secure more funding from the Treasury for social care to alleviate the pressure on councils such as Kirklees?

Rishi Sunak: In the most recent local government finance settlement, the Secretary of State listened to councils' concerns and increased funding for adult social care by £150 million, with £26 million for Kirklees Council in particular. I recently met the Key Cities group, of which Kirklees is a member, to discuss its ideas for reforming the funding formula so as to adequately reflect the pressures faced by councils such as Kirklees.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): When the then Communities and Local Government Committee adopted the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) that became the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, Ministers, to their credit, engaged really positively to make that Bill work. May I urge the Minister to be just as positive about the planned joint Committee inquiry into the funding of adult care? Indeed, Front Benchers on both sides of the House will need to engage with that process if we are to have a long-term answer.

Rishi Sunak: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. As he knows, the Government are committed to publishing a Green Paper on adult social care this summer. Alongside that, there is a workstream on working-age adult social care to which I am sure that he will be keen to contribute.

25. [904313] **Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): Increasing the social care precept will do nothing to solve the challenge that we face in social care. Is it not time that Ministers stopped passing the buck to local councils and instead worked with us to try to find a long-term solution to one of the greatest challenges that we face as a country?

Rishi Sunak: I agree with the hon. Lady that this is a challenge facing our country, and it is important that we get this right and put social care on a sustainable footing, not just for this year but for the years to come. That is exactly why the Government are committed to

the Green Paper and to tackling this problem, and she should look forward to seeing the Green Paper's contents this summer.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): The Minister referred to the local government finance settlement, but this year's settlement still means a cut of £177 million for adult social care compared with last year. Given that the National Audit Office's report states that more and more councils are only just managing to balance their books by using their reserves to cover overspends on social care services, how does the Minister suggest that councils can avoid declaring themselves effectively bankrupt, as Northamptonshire County Council did last month, as in many cases their reserves will be gone by 2020?

Rishi Sunak: I simply do not recognise those figures. The Government have increased funding for adult social care. Over these three years, £9.4 billion has been allocated for adult social care funding, with £150 million more at the last local government finance settlement. This Government are listening to councils and delivering extra resources to help them.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): The Local Government Finance Act 2012 divorced local government funding from any assessment of need. The Government's insistence that the problem can be solved by councils raising precepts is simply wrong, because councils in wealthier areas, which have more properties in the higher bands, can raise more money than those with more properties in the lower bands, which usually have the greatest needs, the greatest levels of long-term disease and so on. When will the Minister understand this and actually start to allocate social services funding on the basis of need?

Rishi Sunak: I can reassure the hon. Lady that the allocation for social care funding does take into account the relative council tax bases of local authorities across the country. That said, I appreciate that the funding formula is out of date and in need of review, which is why we have launched a consultation on reforming it. That consultation closes today, but I would welcome her comments and input into it. We will reform the formula so that it can adequately take account of need, as she suggests.

Help To Buy Scheme

6. **David Warburton** (Somerton and Frome) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of the Help to Buy scheme and the reduction in stamp duty on first-time buyers. [904294]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): The number of first-time buyers was at an 11-year high in 2017, at 365,000 across the UK. That shows that our concerted action to get more people into home ownership through initiatives such as Help to Buy and the new stamp duty exemption for first-time buyers is working.

David Warburton: It sounds like my right hon. Friend agrees with me that home ownership is a fundamentally good thing. Some 86% of our fellow citizens aspire to it, and there is nothing like spreading the economic benefits

of ownership more widely in society. Does he further agree that we should use every policy lever at our disposal to encourage home ownership and to give those all-important first-time buyers a leg up on to the ladder?

Sajid Javid: I could not agree more. The overwhelming majority of people want to own their own home, and we need to do more to help them to do just that. The plan that we have set out, including last week, to build 300,000 homes a year will help more and more people to realise that dream.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Why does the Secretary of State not wake up? So many people in my constituency and throughout the country know that this Government have failed to deliver enough houses to buy and enough to rent. The fact is that there are so many nimbys sitting on the Government Benches—he is speaking to one of them—that Ministers do not have the courage to do anything about it.

Sajid Javid: It is the Conservatives who are responsible for house building last year reaching its highest level in all but one of the past 30 years, and it was under a previous Labour Government that we had the lowest level of house building that this country had seen since the 1920s.

New Homes

7. **David T. C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): What progress his Department has made on the delivery of new homes. [904295]

16. **Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): What progress his Department has made on the delivery of new homes. [904304]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Last year, some 217,000 homes were added to our housing stock in England. We have set out bold and comprehensive reforms to deliver on average 300,000 homes a year by the middle of the 2020s in England, including in last week's publication of the draft revised national planning policy framework.

David T. C. Davies: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the enormous progress that he is making. Does he agree, however, that it will not be possible to get the housing shortage completely under control until we have brought migration levels down from the completely unsustainable heights that were created by Labour?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that we are committed to both reducing net migration to sustainable levels and building the homes that this country needs.

Lucy Allan: Telford is a rapidly growing new town in which thousands of new homes are built every year, but for too many new-build homeowners, the reality is unfinished communal areas, unadopted roads, failure to comply with section 106, developers failing to take responsibility and the local council passing the buck. What will the Secretary of State do to strengthen the rights of new-build homeowners?

Sajid Javid: First, let me commend my hon. Friend for the work that she does through the all-party group on new towns. She is absolutely right to raise that issue and to emphasise the need for infrastructure alongside new housing. I know that she welcomes the housing infrastructure fund. In terms of holding developers to their commitments, I hope that she will contribute to our consultation on that topic, which was launched just this week.

20. [904308] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Figures for York show that no new social housing has been commissioned under the current council for the last three years, except for older people's accommodation, where there has been a net loss. The right to buy has made things worse. When, under the Government's new planning framework, will the council be forced to build social housing in York?

Sajid Javid: We are working with councils throughout the country to help them to meet their housing needs, including through more social housing where that is required. The proof of that was in the last Budget, in which we increased the housing revenue account—the amount that councils can borrow from the Treasury to build more council homes and other types of social housing. If York wants to take advantage of that, it can.

23. [904311] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): Bristol has the highest rate of office-to-residential accommodation conversions outside London, and the permitted development rights scheme means that that does not have to involve any affordable housing element. What is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that councils such as Bristol can insist that affordable housing is built in our city centre?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is right to raise the importance of affordable housing and having the right mix of housing everywhere, including Bristol. We are currently working with the Mayor of the west of England and the Mayor of Bristol on a housing deal which, if it happened, would include a significant portion of affordable housing.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Green-belt protections around Bristol and Bath are displacing housing targets beyond the green belt into Somerset. Should the councils unable to build enough houses be required to deliver transport and infrastructure plans that will service the commuting needs of new Somerset residents needing to travel through the protected green belt on their way to work?

Sajid Javid: We want to help all councils meet their local housing need, and that includes helping with their plans as they develop them, but also giving them more options other than looking at the green belt, as we did in the recent draft plan that was published earlier this month, and helping with infrastructure, which means the £5 billion housing infrastructure fund.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The previous Conservative Mayor of London set up the London housing bank, a loan scheme so restrictive that housing providers could not borrow from it. Will the

Secretary of State explain why, instead of responding to requests from the current Mayor of London over the past 18 months to remove some of the restrictions on this scheme to enable much-needed affordable homes to be built, he has decided to withdraw the funding for affordable homes altogether? Will he also explain how it is that the first the Mayor's office heard of this was via an article in *The Huffington Post*?

Sajid Javid: We all want more affordable homes, including of course in our capital city, and that is why over £3 billion was given to London for affordable housing in the spring Budget. It was the biggest ever settlement, and it was welcomed by the Mayor. Yet despite that, we have seen a fall in affordable housing delivery under Sadiq Khan. That is not acceptable: he needs to do much better.

8. **Nicky Morgan** (Loughborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the time taken to build new homes. [904296]

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): Last week, the Government published the national planning policy framework for consultation, which, with clearer guidance to councils and developers, will help to deliver more homes and do so more quickly.

Nicky Morgan: I thank the Minister for that answer. Charnwood Borough Council—for the sake for disclosure, I should say that my husband is the leader, although I refuse to call him that—has planning permissions for 10 years of housing, but the difficulty is getting the developers to start building. If that does not happen, that affects the five-year land supply, which leaves other sites vulnerable to development. Will the Minister tell the House what the Government are planning to do to speed up delivery by developers on planning permissions they already have?

Dominic Raab: The good news is that, in 2017, we saw 160,000 new homes registered to be built, which is the highest number since the financial crash. My right hon. Friend is right about speed. The NPPF will help to deliver that through the housing delivery test, and my right hon. Friend for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) is reviewing build-out rates.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I have no wish to be unkind to the hon. Lady, but let me put it this way: we have had a dose from Bath, and by long-standing convention, a Member is not called twice on substantive questions. If the hon. Lady seeks to catch my eye during topical questions, she may be successful. I admire her persistence, but I hope she will understand that that is the way we operate.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): She is greedy.

Mr Speaker: No, no. The hon. Lady is not greedy; she is just keen.

Local Authority Plans

9. **John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): How many local authorities have had their local plans signed off by his Department in the last two years. [904297]

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): In nearly all cases, it is for local authorities to take the final decision on a local plan. In the past two years, 50 local plans were deemed sound by planning inspectors, and one by the Ministry itself.

John Mann: Yes, but let us look at this consultation from last week. According to the Government, neighbourhood plans can be overturned by local councils above them, and—above them—local council plans can be overturned by the Secretary of State and his faceless bureaucrats. What is wrong in this country with freedom and democracy, with local people making the decisions effectively, fairly and democratically? Is this Joe Stalin or English democracy that this Government are forcing upon us?

Dominic Raab: For all that thunder and lightning, we are investing £23 million to support neighbourhood planning groups. I gently remind the hon. Gentleman that 94% of councils have published local plans, compared with 32% when Labour left office. The previous Labour Government wantonly failed to deliver on encouraging the take-up of local plans, where this Government have succeeded.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Talking of planning ahead, two councils in Somerset—Taunton Deane Borough Council and West Somerset Council—are waiting to form a single council. They have already had major savings by sharing services jointly, but they now really need to know if they can form one authority. Will my hon. Friend update me on the progress of this process?

Dominic Raab: The issue is under imminent review. The Secretary of State is giving it his personal attention and a decision will be taken shortly.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Last week I attended a meeting of the Eaton Park residents association as part of the consultation on Stoke-on-Trent's joint local plan. They are aghast at proposals to use the greenfield site of Berryhill Fields, while brownfield sites are left unlooked at. When it comes to looking for new housing development sites, what can the Minister say to ensure that those residents know that brownfield sites will always be chosen over greenfield sites?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We have reinforced the focus on brownfield first, plus things like looking for extra density where it can be provided, through the national planning policy framework. I look forward to his supportive comments during the consultation.

New Homes for Social Rent

10. **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of new homes for social rent since 2010. [904298]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): Since 2010 we have delivered 357,000 affordable homes, including about 128,000 homes for social rent.

The Government are providing £9 billion for affordable housing, a £1 billion housing revenue account borrowing freedom, and rent certainty for social landlords. Those measures will support social landlords to build more affordable homes where the need is greatest.

Stephen Timms: The number of Government-funded homes built for social rent fell to 199 in the past six months—the lowest number since records have been kept. Is it not now clear that there is an urgent need for a major Government-funded programme of social housing?

Mrs Wheeler: I know that this is an issue that the right hon. Gentleman has championed, and it is a pleasure to do business with him. We absolutely recognise the critical role that supported accommodation can play in helping vulnerable people to live independently. In fact, we have delivered almost 30,000 new units and we have plans to increase the number in those areas that need it most.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for her answers. Will she explain why the Department is returning to the Treasury money that could be used to build desperately needed affordable new homes?

Mrs Wheeler: I am delighted that my hon. Friend has asked that question, because some people seem to be causing mischief. This is less than 3% of the total budget. The money has been re-profiled, to come back in in future years. When councils, local authorities and housing associations can bid in, the money is there to be spent. We want it to be spent.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Building council houses is a very effective and financially prudent way to provide houses for social rent, but it is being choked off by the Government persisting with only inching the cap up, when they could remove it completely. When will they remove the cap and let our councils get building?

Mrs Wheeler: I do not understand why people misunderstand what is going on in local government finance. For those areas with the most serious shortages of affordable housing, the cap has been lifted to £1 billion of borrowing. We need local authorities to step up. If the hon. Gentleman's local council has projects, like mine does, they will be looked on favourably. Please ask local councils to step up.

Rough Sleeping: West Midlands

11. **Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab):** What recent estimate he has made of the number of people sleeping rough in the west midlands. [904299]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): The number of evening rough sleepers in the west midlands has increased by eight people over the year from 2016 to 2017.

Ian Austin indicated dissent.

Mrs Wheeler: I have the figures, sir; please do not disagree with me. We have committed to providing £28 million of funding to pilot a Housing First approach

in three major regions, including that of the West Midlands combined authority. I look forward very much to working with Mayor Street.

Ian Austin: Anybody in the west midlands who hears the Minister say that the number of rough sleepers has increased by only eight will be absolutely staggered at this Government's complacency. The fact is that rough sleeping has soared, not just in Birmingham but even in towns such as Dudley, where, tragically, a homeless man died in a tent in the past few weeks. The Mayor's policy will not result in rough sleeping being abolished until 2027. We need a much more urgent approach. Are Ministers prepared to fund an expansion of Birmingham City Council and the Labour police and crime commissioner's street intervention teams, which have helped hundreds of people over the past few months?

Mrs Wheeler: That was a really good question. Intelligent questions in this Chamber are helpful, because they mean we can give intelligent answers. The intelligent answer is that the Housing First project is about wraparound care, with £28 million of public money going to help to solve this desperate problem. The advisory panel is meeting for the third time in two weeks' time and the taskforce has already met. This is an urgent matter for the Government and it will be solved.

Local Government Finance Settlement 2018-19

12. **Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the effect of the local government finance settlement 2018-19 on the financial sustainability of local authorities. [904300]

19. **Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the effect of the local government finance settlement 2018-19 on the ability of local authorities to meet their statutory responsibilities. [904307]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): The 2018-19 settlement is the third year of a four-year deal providing funding certainty and is accepted by 97% of councils. The settlement sees a real-terms increase in resources to local government over the next two years, totalling £45.1 billion in the forthcoming financial year.

Diana Johnson: Hull is the third most deprived local authority in the country. Two thirds more Hull residents require social care compared with the national average. We have lost half our Government funding since 2010 and we will be getting the lowest amount per head from the social care precept of any Yorkshire and Humber council. With the Government having got it so wrong so far, will the Minister guarantee that Hull will now get a fair funding settlement?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady makes some comments about funding for deprived areas. She will be pleased to know that funding per household in her particular area is higher than the average for unitary authorities across the country and that in general the most deprived local authorities have funding per household that is 23% higher than the most well-off. On her point, I can reassure her that we are committed to introducing a new fair funding formula and I look forward to hearing the responses from her council as we develop it.

Matt Western: In a letter to the Secretary of State last month, the Conservative leader of Warwickshire County Council stated that in the council's view the current funding model for local government is unsustainable. Is she correct?

Rishi Sunak: I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman makes a point about the funding settlement and the formula. He will know from his membership of the Select Committee, which I have just had the pleasure to appear before, that we are looking very hard at the structure of local government financing, both increasing the amount of business rates retentions to 75% and introducing a new needs-based formula that takes into account updated needs and resources. I know his Committee will play a huge part in making sure that we get that right for Warwickshire and for the country.

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): Over the years, I have strongly supported the pressure we have rightly put local authorities under to improve efficiency and bear down on waste, and I am sure that elsewhere in the country there are examples of where more needs to be done. In the south-west, however, my impression is that the finances of Devon, Plymouth and many other local authorities have been cut to the bone. I think there is an opportunity for the Government to be more generous with efficient local authorities in the south-west to enable them to make sure their priorities are delivered.

Rishi Sunak: I pay tribute to the work of local government across the country. Local authorities have done a commendable job over the past few years of delivering high quality services in a difficult financial climate. I thank them, as I know their constituents do. On my hon. Friend's point, I look forward to the representations from Devon and the south-west as we reform local government financing through the fair funding formula which is coming soon.

24. [904312] **Mr David Lammy** (Tottenham) (Lab): On 4 July, the Secretary of State said to the House that he would help, with every precaution, local authorities dealing with the cladding problem across our country following the Grenfell Tower fire. Why, despite over 41 local authorities asking for that help and the Department giving £817 million back to the Treasury, has he not been able to find the money to help those poor worried people who are in those buildings as we speak?

Rishi Sunak: The Department is in discussions with multiple local authorities on the requirements to improve the safety of buildings. My understanding is that the Department has not said no to any local authority thus far that is seeking flexibility with those plans.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): My own council in Derbyshire has seen £180 million—over half of its budget—cut in the past seven years. It cannot now offer enough money for social care packages for terminally ill people to receive care in their own home. They are being forced to die in hospital away from their loved ones. What will the Minister do to make sure that councils

receive the proper funding that they need to be able to free up hospital beds and support families in the most urgent need?

Rishi Sunak: As we have been discussing, the Government have put extra financial resources into social care. It is pleasing to see that over the past year, delayed transfers of care across England attributable to social care have fallen by 34%, showing that the resources we are putting in are making a difference on the ground.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Since 2010, Hull City Council has been forced to cut its children's services budget by £37.2 million, which means that it has not had the money that it has needed for early intervention support for families. It is no surprise that the number of looked-after children in Hull has increased by 140—that is 140 children's lives changed forever. Will the Minister please give authorities such as Hull City Council more money, so that they can give those families support when they need it, before they enter crisis?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight the important work that prevention plays. Nobody wants to see a child in need in those circumstances, which is why this Government have committed almost £1 billion to the troubled families programme over this period in the spending review. As recent results have shown, that is reducing the number of children in need after heavy intervention from their key workers in the programme.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, the respected National Audit Office published its report on the financial sustainability of local authorities. It made clear the significant challenges faced by councils and the vital services that they deliver. Can the Secretary of State prove that he is on the side of local councils and place in the House of Commons Library any submissions that he has made to the Chancellor ahead of the spring statement?

Rishi Sunak: I also read the National Audit Office report with interest. I was pleased to see that it made very positive comments about the Department's work in getting to grips with the challenges across local government and making sure that the sector is properly resourced and looks forward to the reviews that are being put in place to improve funding and business rates retention.

Council Housing

13. **Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): What resources he is providing to local authorities to build council housing. [904301]

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): The Government are committed to delivering a new generation of council homes, and we are providing local authorities with the tools and resources to deliver them.

Clive Efford: In 2009-10, the last Labour Government had 40,000 housing starts in one year. This Government have financed 199 in the last six months. Given that we

have such a shortage of social housing and a homelessness crisis, how do the Government explain this risible performance?

Dominic Raab: For the record on the hon. Gentleman's figures, local authorities have built over 10,000 homes since 2010-11 compared with under 3,000 in the 13 years of the last Labour Government. We are restless to do much more, and that is why we are raising the housing revenue account borrowing cap by up to £1 billion to make sure that we spur local house building as far and as wide as we can.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Is it in the interests of the private sector to build in sufficient quantity as to achieve a reduction in price?

Dominic Raab: It is a good question, and probably one for a symposium with everyone from developers to planners. The reality is that we want to see a stabilisation in house prices. We need to build more homes and deal with some of the demand issues that have been raised. There is no single answer; we have to yank every lever at our disposal 20% or 30% harder.

Support for Local Government

14. **Edward Argar** (Charnwood) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of his Department's support for local government. [904302]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): The 2018-19 settlement sees a real-terms increase in resources for local government over the next two years, increasing from £44.3 billion to £45.6 billion.

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend will be aware that under Governments of both parties, Leicestershire has had one of the lowest per head of population funding settlements in the country. Will he ensure that as the new funding system is consulted on and brought in, it addresses this issue and provides fair funding for Leicestershire, alongside his Department continuing to support our councils in driving further efficiencies and service improvements?

Jake Berry: In particular for Leicestershire but for all councils, there could be no better champion than my hon. Friend of fairer funding for the many councils, not the few. This evidence-based review will provide an opportunity for more accurate funding allocations for Leicestershire and other councils.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): On 4 December, the Secretary of State told the House that "the local government finance settlement is coming along shortly, and he can look to see what happens with that."—[*Official Report*, 4 December 2017; Vol. 632, c. 684.]

Apart from our finding out that the Secretary of State is bad at maths and does not know what is happening in his Department, the settlement came and went with no help for children's services. Since then, Tory Northamptonshire Council has effectively gone bust, citing children's services as one of the main cost pressures, and only last week the National Audit Office published a damning report showing the worst crisis in the local

government sector's 170-year history. That is happening on these Ministers' watch. With the spring statement tomorrow, what will the Minister do to ensure that our children's services get the £2 billion that even the Tory-controlled Local Government Association says they so desperately need?

Jake Berry: We have increased funding in real terms, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman's constituents, like mine, will welcome. With the fairer funding review coming up, rather than trying to score political points across the Chamber, why does he not get involved with it so that local authorities can concentrate on delivery?

21. [904309] **Julia Lopez** (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Can my hon. Friend provide assurances that the rapidly increasing demographic pressures on outer London boroughs will be fully considered as part of the fairer funding review?

Jake Berry: I can absolutely provide that assurance to my hon. Friend. Demographic change will be at the heart of the fairer funding review.

Children in Care

15. **Ged Killen** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to support local authorities to fulfil their statutory duties in relation to children in care. [904303]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): Over the spending review period, councils will receive more than £200 billion to deliver local services. This money is largely not ring-fenced, so local authorities can prioritise where they see fit, including for their statutory duties relating to children in care.

Ged Killen: With the education disparity between looked-after and non-looked-after children being so wide, what more does the Minister believe local authorities can do to bridge the gap?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Gentleman raises a good point about the outcomes for children in care. The Government are consulting and are shortly to introduce the care leavers covenant, which will look to support companies, charities and local government to bring care leavers into employment after they leave care, and we are strengthening corporate parenting provisions under the Children and Social Work Act 2017.

Land Banking

17. **Chris Ruane** (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to tackle the practice of land banking. [904305]

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): Over 1 million homes have been delivered since 2010, but we are taking forward a range of reforms to build even more homes more swiftly, including under the national planning policy framework, which was published last week.

Chris Ruane: Two weeks ago, I asked the Department for the number of houses that will not be built because of land banking, and the answer came back:

“The Department does not hold the requested information.”

How can the Minister crack down on land banking if he has no information? I believe that the Minister does have that information, and I urge him to publish it so that he can monitor the builders and we can monitor his performance.

Dominic Raab: I welcome that scrutiny. It is very difficult to establish a negative in the way the hon. Gentleman suggests, but I can reassure him, first, that we have the housing delivery test in the NPPF, which will focus local authorities and developers on the delivery of new homes, and, secondly, that there is the review by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) of build-out rates, which will squarely address the point he is concerned about.

Devolution to Towns and Cities

18. **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to devolve power to towns and cities. [904306]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): For areas that have not agreed deals so far, we aim to be able to provide clarity on how best to take forward their ambitions for devolution and local growth over the coming months.

Martin Vickers: The Minister will be aware that the Greater Lincolnshire deal collapsed last year, despite its having the support of an overwhelming number of the local authorities. Will the Minister look favourably on a revised scheme from a smaller number of authorities in the county?

Jake Berry: Devolution could almost be regarded as the golden thread of Brexit. If we want to take back control, we should bring powers not just from Brussels to London but from London back to our regions. Last Friday, I met borough and county councils in both Gainsborough and the city of Lincoln, and I was struck by the pent-up demand for devolution in Lincolnshire. I suggest that my hon. Friend use his considerable leadership role to drive forward devolution in his area.

Topical Questions

T1. [904314] **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): Yesterday, we marked Mother's Day, a few days after International Women's Day and the 100th anniversary of women getting the vote. Hon. Members will want to join me in applauding the exceptional women who make this country great, including our Prime Minister, who last week launched bold and ambitious reforms of planning rules to help to build the homes this country needs. I am pleased to announce that since my last departmental oral questions the homelessness reduction taskforce has met for the

first time and that the Government have confirmed their support for the national war memorial honouring Sikh servicemen.

Tom Pursglove: Corby and East Northamptonshire have been at the forefront of the building of new homes, which is entirely in line with the agenda set out by the Prime Minister last week, but can my right hon. Friend reassure my constituents that the appropriate infrastructure will accompany those homes at all times?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of infrastructure to the building of the homes that we need. That is why the housing infrastructure fund is so important. As a result of his hard work, Corby received £4 million in the first allocation, but I know that there is much more to be done, and I am listening carefully to what he says.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): Nine months on from the Grenfell Tower fire, can the Secretary of State say—yes or no—whether every tower block with a social or private landlord which has Grenfell-type cladding has now been identified and tested?

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise this issue. It is, of course, absolutely key that we ensure that we are helping local councils to identify those tower blocks. When it comes to social housing, we believe that all those tower blocks, whether owned by local councils or housing associations, have been identified. We continue to work with local councils, and that includes giving them additional financial support. Just last week we gave them £1 million to make sure that they had identified every single tower block in the private sector, and they will continue to receive whatever support they need.

John Healey: I think that that was a long-winded “no”, and it was consistent with the recent building safety data release. How is it that, nine months after Grenfell, not all private tower blocks with suspect cladding have been tested? Why have only seven of 301 blocks with Grenfell-type cladding had it removed and replaced? Why has not one of the 41 councils that have asked for financial help with extra fire safety work even received an answer from the Department? The right hon. Gentleman is the Housing Secretary. What does he say to reasonable people faced with those facts who feel that he is failing the Prime Minister's pledge in June, when she said:

“My Government will do whatever it takes to...keep...people safe”?

Sajid Javid: Reasonable people understand just how important this issue is, and they do not take kindly to the right hon. Gentleman's playing party politics with it. If he actually cared about the issue, he would not raise it in such a way. He would not use numbers and twist the facts to try to scare the public. The truth is that we are working with local authorities up and down the country to locate every single building and take remedial measures, and also helping them with funds. Despite what he has said, not a single council has been turned away. We are talking to every single council that has approached us, and we have made it clear that they will all be given the financial flexibility, if they need it, that will enable them to get the job done.

T4. [904317] **Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Thousands of houses have been granted planning permission in my constituency, but there are often long delays before they are actually built. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that, when planning permission is granted, homes are built, particularly affordable homes?

Sajid Javid: I can give my hon. Friend the assurance for which she has asked. First, we have commissioned independent work from my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) on speeding up building once planning permission has been granted. We shall hear more about that this week. Secondly, the consultation that was published earlier this week focuses on developer contributions in particular, and the need to ensure that developers stick to their word and can no longer game the system.

T2. [904315] **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): On 1 March we saw the relaunch of the parliamentary campaign for council housing, bringing together MPs in all parties to call for the mass building of council housing. Can the Secretary of State, or a Minister, specify what the Department is doing to accelerate the expansion of the building of council housing?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): I reiterate that we are raising the housing revenue account borrowing limit to £1 billion for local authorities where there is the highest need for new council housing to be built. Again, please may I ask the hon. Gentleman to encourage councils in his area to apply?

T5. [904318] **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What recent assessment has the Department made of the success of the troubled families programme?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I know that my hon. Friend has a long history of being interested in this programme. He will be pleased to know that the evaluation reports published in December showed promising progress, particularly with regard to children in need. Further findings will be published in the annual report, and I look forward to discussing them at length with my hon. Friend then.

T3. [904316] **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): The current definition of affordable housing, introduced by the coalition Government, is set at 80% of local market rate, but when house prices are spiralling out of control, as they are in my constituency, this definition of affordable housing is a cruel joke to those on low or median income. Will the Secretary of State commit to replacing this absurd definition so that housing can be genuinely affordable to my constituents?

The Minister for Housing (Dominic Raab): I understand the issue the hon. Lady raises. I would just say that the numbers on social housing waiting lists are down by half a million since 2010, and the number of affordable homes in total, including social housing, is higher in the last seven years than in the last seven years of the last Labour Government. However, we are anxious to do even more. I am not sure that fiddling with the criteria

for how these things are measured is the answer. We need to build more homes across the board and I welcome the hon. Lady's support in that regard.

T7. [904320] **Nicky Morgan** (Loughborough) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) has already raised the issue of fairer funding for Leicestershire County Council. The county council is broadly supportive of the Government's consultation, but does the Minister agree that the overall funding formula needs to be looked at in detail, because if the baseline is not addressed Leicestershire will still be falling behind other county councils?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with my right hon. Friend, and Leicestershire in particular has done much work on this, which will certainly feed into the consultation on fairer funding that is closing today. My hon. Friend the Minister for Housing recently met with Leicestershire and I would be very happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss this further.

T6. [904319] **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): Given the importance of European Union regional development funding to communities in Scotland and across the UK, what discussions is the Secretary of State having with the Treasury about replacement funding after Brexit?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): We are having wide discussions with all Departments across Government consulting on the UK's shared prosperity fund, which, crucially, in a post-Brexit world, will deliver on Britain's priorities when it comes to local growth funding.

T8. [904321] **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): A recent report by the Campaign to Protect Rural England says that viability assessments favour large developers over small developers and cut the number of affordable homes by 50%. Will the Minister take the strongest possible action to make sure that small and medium-sized enterprises compete on a level playing field with large developers, and that developers provide homes for those most in need?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and through our planning reforms we are putting far more rigour into the system so that plans are clear about the obligations expected for infrastructure and affordable houses, and also so that developers can be properly held to account in meeting those aspirations and commitments.

T9. [904322] **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): If the Government are serious about the northern powerhouse and improving connectivity between communities in the north, does the northern powerhouse Minister think TransPennine's plans to lengthen journeys from Hull across the Pennines, and not turning up to a meeting with the city's MPs and business leaders last week to discuss this, will help to deliver his plans for the northern powerhouse?

Jake Berry: It is extremely disappointing if TransPennine did not turn up to a meeting with Members of Parliament from the city of Hull. I hope that the hon. Lady will be encouraged, however, that we are investing £13 billion—more money than any Government in history—in our

northern transport infrastructure, and we have also set up Transport for the North, a subnational statutory transport body, which is currently consulting on a 30-year plan to improve transport across the north of England. That is how to deliver a northern powerhouse.

T10. [904323] Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): With High Speed 2 set to displace a number of tenants living in social housing in my constituency, will my hon. Friend consider whether the Rent Act 1977, which obliges councils to rehouse council tenants whose homes are subject to compulsory purchase orders, will need amending to reflect the fact that the majority of social housing stock is now owned by housing associations rather than local authorities?

Dominic Raab: I entirely understand my hon. Friend's concerns, but I hope that I can give her some reassurance. I do not think that there is any need to amend the 1977 Act because local authorities are already obliged, through the Housing Act 1996, to consider those in need of social housing, so local authorities will make appropriate nominations to housing associations or offer tenancies in their own stock.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): March is generally regarded as the start of the illegal Traveller encampment season. Given that the hon. Members for Reading West (Alok Sharma) and for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) are no longer in their posts in the Department, what has happened to the consultation and the timescale for action that the Government promised my frustrated constituents?

Sajid Javid: It is an important issue, and we are looking to see what more we can do with the challenges that it represents. We are planning to publish a consultation and will do so as soon as possible.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): An article in *The Sunday Times* yesterday highlighted that some councils are still performing mass burials of babies. To be honest, I was appalled. Some research today has identified that, despite campaign efforts by colleagues across the House and charities such as CLIC Sargent, we have not yet been able to set up a children's funeral fund. Will the Secretary of State meet me to progress the matter?

Sajid Javid: Nothing can be harder on a parent than losing a child, and we must always look to see what can be done to provide help. Local authorities do provide help in many ways, but my hon. Friend is right to raise this matter. I, too, was concerned by the article she mentioned, and I will be happy to meet with her.

Mr Speaker: Patience rewarded—I call Wera Hobhouse.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Every day is a school day, particularly when it comes to parliamentary conventions.

Affordable housing and council housing are not the same. Instead of always mentioning affordable housing and council housing in the same breath, will the Minister consider amending the national planning policy framework to enable councils to specify in their strategic plans different housing types for each site allocation?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady makes an important point but, if she looks at the detail of the new revised national planning policy framework, she will see that there is scope for local authorities to make precisely the distinction that she mentions. I look forward to her support.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): When are we likely to get a decision on the fantastic plans for expansion at the Mall at Cribbs Causeway in my constituency? With the greatest of respect, I do not know why the Secretary of State is taking so long, because I do not know what there is not to like about thousands of new permanent jobs, more housing and better transport infrastructure.

Sajid Javid: I should declare an interest, because I have been shopping at Cribbs Causeway many times and it is probably my mum's favourite shopping complex. It is a live planning issue and we are considering it in detail. It is relatively complex, but we will try to reach a decision as quickly as possible.

Mr Speaker: It is very useful to learn about Ministers' domestic habits, and we are grateful to the Secretary of State for providing further information on that score.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The Conservative-run Northamptonshire County Council has recently gone bust. Was that due to a lack of Government funding or local incompetence?

Sajid Javid: The council has not gone bust. Owing to concerns around its finances, I appointed an independent investigation weeks ago—a best-value inspection—and the inspector, Mr Max Caller, will report back later this week.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I welcome the Government's encouraging words about the need to improve funding for the upper tiers, but will the Secretary of State congratulate the Conservative-run Broxtowe Borough Council, which has frozen its council tax yet again while delivering excellent services, reducing rents by 1% and spending half a million pounds on parks and open spaces? Does he share my amazement that the council's Labour and Lib Dem members voted against this otherwise excellent budget?

Sajid Javid: I am not amazed by the behaviour of Labour and the Lib Dems, because such behaviour is sadly happening throughout the country. I warmly congratulate Broxtowe Borough Council on keeping taxes low and service delivery high, which is a reminder—so close to the local elections—that Conservative councils cost less and deliver more.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I raise Grenfell and cladding in a nice, non-political way? I am sure that the Secretary of State will agree that the facts of the matter are that the Government have rightly increased the standards and that the costs should surely be borne partly by the freeholder, partly by the leaseholder and partly by the Government. Why not get the three parties together to do something about that?

Sajid Javid: We have made it clear that, when it comes to the private sector and this type of remedial work, it should take a lead from the social sector. It is the moral duty of any freeholder to meet any necessary costs. There are a number of legal issues. There is an important legal case that is going through the courts right now, so I will not comment much more, but it is something that we are keeping under review.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Councils in rural areas have received a raw deal on local government funding for many, many years, even though the cost of delivering services in rural areas is often significantly higher. Will the Minister assure me that in the local government finance review the true cost of delivering services will be considered and that rural areas get a fair deal?

Rishi Sunak: I know that my hon. Friend is a doughty champion of rural areas. I am delighted to tell him that his point will be exactly considered in the fair funding formula. I am sure that he will be heartened by the local government finance settlement, where we increase rural services delivery grant to its highest ever level.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: We have three remaining questioners if each of the three agrees to ask a single-sentence question not exceeding 20 words. I call Mr Robert Courts.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I know that the Secretary of State is well aware of the requirement for infrastructure when new homes are built. What can he do to include broadband in that?

Sajid Javid: We are working with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to do just that.

Mr Speaker: He is not a lawyer for nothing. I call Julia Lopez.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Following revelations in *The Sunday Times* about fraudulent Grenfell aid claims, what assurances can my right hon. Friend offer that financial support is going only to those directly affected by this tragedy?

Sajid Javid: I will not comment on the particular claims—I am sure that my hon. Friend will understand—but it is important that both the council and the police are working together on any such alleged behaviour.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Under its new garden town status, Taunton Deane is delivering well above the national average for houses, which the Secretary of State will welcome. Does he agree that the best way to provide the infrastructure that those houses need is to succeed with the recently submitted housing infrastructure forward funding bid, put in with West Somerset Council?

Sajid Javid: Yes.

Mr Speaker: I suppose that two probably did not amount to more than 41 words. I think that we are done. Are we done? We are done.

Hate Crime

3.37 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on hate crime in light of the inflammatory letters inciting a “Punish a Muslim day” on 3 April.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Mr Speaker, as you will appreciate, the letters described in the question are part of an ongoing investigation, and as such I am not in a position to comment on them. However, the Government condemn the content of the letters as clearly abhorrent, with no place in decent society. This Government take hate crime and Islamophobia extremely seriously, and the UK has a robust legislative framework to respond to it.

Freedom of speech, freedom of worship, democracy, the rule of law, and equal rights define us as a society. The Government are determined to promote those values actively, working in partnership and alongside Muslim and, indeed, all faith communities to demonstrate that what we have in common is the best defence against extremists who would seek to divide us.

Our hate crime action plan, published in 2016, sets out our comprehensive approach to tackling hate crime. We have a strong legislative framework to tackle hate crime, including offences of inciting racial and religious hatred, and racial and religiously aggravated offences. The legislation provides equal protection under the law for all ethnic and religious groups. We have sources of expert advice on the nature and causes of hate crime through the anti-Muslim hatred working group and the independent advisory group on hate crime.

We have committed £2.4 million over three years to help to protect places of worship that have been the subject of or are vulnerable to a hate crime attack. We also committed a further £1 million following the terrible Finsbury Park terror attack in June last year, to help to protect places of worship and associated community centres that are vulnerable to attack on racial, religious or ideological grounds. So far, we have funded 45 mosques under both schemes. We have also funded Tell MAMA to record anti-Muslim hatred incidents and to support victims. From this year, we have made it mandatory for police forces to disaggregate religious hate crime data held by the police to reveal the true scale and nature of the problem, which we are determined to tackle.

Yasmin Qureshi: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. The letter calling for an attack on Muslims on 3 April offers attackers rewards, ranging from 10 points for verbal abuse, 50 points for throwing acid and 1,000 points for bombing a mosque to 2,500 points for nuking Mecca. May I remind the House that millions of Muslims fought for us in the two world wars, including members of my family? Figures show that the number of Islamophobia hate crimes has increased by 40%, with 1,678 anti-Muslim hate crimes reported in London in the year up to January 2018. Can the Minister therefore explain why no Minister in the past eight years has made a speech on the rise of anti-Muslim hatred?

Recent surveys have shown that 50% of the British population believe that Islam is a threat to western democracy and more than 30% of young children believe that Muslims are taking over England. Given that such anti-Muslim views have gained such traction, what are the Government going to do to help to prevent the growth of such extreme views, which appear to have come from parts of the print, broadcast and social media? What concrete steps are the Government going to take to tackle this growth in hate crimes and hatred against Muslims? Will the Minister set out the amount of funding provided by the Home Office to tackle each form of bigotry?

I think every Member in this House will accept that there has been a sharp rise in the far right movement in Europe and beyond, with the USA's President retweeting far right material. This is a really urgent situation and it needs to be urgently tackled. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response as to what concrete steps are going to be taken to deal with it.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her urgent question. May I make it clear that this Government want to give a strong message of support to Muslim people across the UK that we are committed to their safety and security? I say to anyone who has received this letter, or a similar communication, please contact the police, where you will be treated with utmost seriousness and action will be taken.

I now move on to the points the hon. Lady made. The issue of anti-Muslim and far right extremism is of course a focus for the Government. As she knows, the Prevent strategy tackles extremism. It does not tackle Muslim extremism in and of itself; it tackles extremism, full stop. Sadly, more than a quarter of referrals in the Prevent strategy in 2015-16 concerned far right extremism. So this Government, and in particular this Prime Minister, with all the experience she brings to her position following her time in the Home Office, are focused on tackling extremism and radicalisation and how they affect any part of our community. That is precisely why we are refreshing the hate crime action plan this year.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I just want to put on the record the fact that the mayor of Broxtowe, Halimah Khaled, just happens to be a Muslim. She happens to be the first person of colour to be mayor of Broxtowe and she is its first Muslim mayor. She also happens to be a Tory. She has completed nearly one year in office, during which time she has had a warm welcome wherever she has gone in my borough, and rightly so. People are sick and tired of hate crime and Islamophobia. This is absolutely no longer to be tolerated. I commend the Minister for everything she has said in her statement, and I do believe this Government take this very seriously. We are not really talking about a hate crime here; it is actually an act of blatant incitement to terrorism. In any event, I am looking over at the co-chair of the all-party group on British Muslims, the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting). We have worked together on this, and I am sure he will agree when I say that the time has now come for a proper legal definition of Islamophobia. Does the Minister agree?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend for her impassioned plea for recognition throughout the country of the role not only of her local mayor, but of many

[*Victoria Atkins*]

other people in public life who happen to practise the Muslim religion as part of their way of life and who contribute so very much to our community. I put on record my thanks to her local mayor.

There are many definitions of Islamophobia, but most people tend to adhere to the one used by the Runnymede Trust. We do not accept the need for a definitive definition, but we know that Islamophobia is clearly recognised and that we have very effective monitoring of race-hate crimes. Considerable work is done on these matters by Tell MAMA and the anti-Muslim hatred working group.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) on securing it.

The despicable sentiments behind these sickening letters has caused revulsion throughout our communities. Although we can be confident that, thanks to the tireless dedication of community leaders, charities, faith groups and civil society, such deliberate attempts to divide us will not succeed, this act will have struck fear into the heart of communities—indeed, that was the intention. It is absolutely an incitement to violence and it cannot go unpunished.

As we have heard, hate crimes are rising nationwide. In London alone, there has been a fivefold increase in attacks on Muslims in the past year. As the outgoing counter-terror chief Mark Rowley has said, the threat from the extreme right wing is significant and requires urgent attention. We have seen the murder of our colleague and friend Jo Cox, the attack at Finsbury Park mosque, the proscription of National Action, the jailing of the leaders of Britain First, and the reports from the Anderson review, which suggested that the extreme right wing is engaged in credible attack planning, including bomb making. There is now overwhelming evidence that the threat from the extreme right is growing increasingly violent. We have to be clear that by threatening members of our diverse communities, these people are also a threat to our national security through their anti-democratic, dehumanising and murderous beliefs.

Given the overwhelming evidence, it is clear that so-called domestic extremism needs to be dealt with as a first-order threat, so will the Minister reassure us that, in line with the Anderson review recommendations, the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre will start to produce national threat assessments of domestic extremism? Will she increase the role for MI5, JTAC and the counter-terrorism network in the monitoring and handling of investigations of domestic extremism? Is it not time to update the Contest strategy to reflect the growing threat from the extreme right?

More broadly, can the Minister assure us that counter-terrorism policing has the resources it needs? The Government's funding settlement last month gave only half what the police requested for counter-terror purposes, while the police and our intelligence services are facing an unprecedented threat from terrorism in all its forms.

We all deplore these despicable letters. They are an attempt to divide us; in that, they will not succeed. We must be united as a House and as a country in bearing down on the insidious beliefs contained within these

letters and be absolutely clear on how we are going to bring together the police, schools, colleges and all authorities to stand up to hate crime and terrorism in every single one of their forms. Finally, we must ensure that all of us, as elected politicians, are at all times responsible in our language and rhetoric and never seek to embolden those who hold such insidious and extremist views.

Victoria Atkins: I am sure that everyone in the House agrees with the hon. Lady, particularly on that last point about the importance of using language very carefully. She asked me about police resources; of course, we have increased them and, as she will know, the Home Secretary reviews those resources constantly. We ask the police whether they have the resources that they need, and the Home Secretary acts accordingly. May I undertake to write to the hon. Lady specifically on JTAC and her other queries? Finally, let me say that it is gratifying to see so many Members present, unified in condemning these dreadful letters and their sentiments and in our determination to tackle them.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Hate crime in all its forms is to be condemned, as is this letter. Another group that is affected by growing hate crime is the Jewish community, and the Community Security Trust is having to go to ever greater lengths to protect local Jewish community centres. Can we ensure that all these forms of hate crime are combated as far as possible?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Of course, any group of people who are the victims of hate crime as a result of their religious beliefs deserve our sympathy and also our action. I, like him, condemn any form of anti-Semitism. I know that the police are as focused on that form of crime as they are on any other form of religious hate crime.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) on securing this urgent question, and reassure her, and the rest of the House, that the Scottish National party joins in the condemnation of Islamophobia in the strongest possible terms? We believe that there is no excuse for any sort of hate crime, and we were as concerned as everyone else in this House to see the significant rise in hate crime statistics in England and Wales last year. We note that that followed a spike in hate crime figures around the time of the EU referendum, and as others have said, this is happening alongside a significant rise in right-wing extremism.

In Scotland, the police are committed to making victims, witnesses and partner agencies feel more confident in reporting hate crime, and they do so through a variety of methods, including a network of third party reporting centres. In Scotland, a senior judge has been appointed to lead an independent review of hate crime legislation, and he will be reporting to the Scottish Government later this year. What reassurance can the Minister give us that similar steps are being taken in the rest of the UK, where hate crime is rising, and in particular that similar steps are being taken to tackle the specific problem at issue here, which is Islamophobia?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her question and, indeed, for her contribution in relation to what is happening in Scotland. We very much

look at how we tackle hate crime, particularly through our hate crime action plan, which was published in 2016 and will be refreshed this year. Its range of actions include: funding for security for places of worship; the disaggregation of religion-based hate crime data; taking further action in relation to education so that teachers can have sometimes difficult conversations with their students about beliefs and words; and funding programmes through the Anne Frank Trust and Streetwise. We are determined to ensure that our action in relation to hate crime is up to date and current.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): As someone who visited a Syrian refugee camp in Malatya in Turkey over the weekend, I find it a little offensive that a Labour Member has said that no Conservative Minister had ever actually condemned any kind of anti-Muslim extremism. Is the Minister aware that her equivalent at the Department for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), publicly rebuked the President of the United States for retweeting certain comments and invited him to visit Muslim communities in the United Kingdom?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend. I must say that I was not sure whether I had heard the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) correctly. As I have said, the record of both the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers on the issue of tackling anti-Muslim sentiments is pretty clear. It may be that the hon. Lady can clarify her remarks at a later stage.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I do not think that the previous question represented the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) was making. I hope that we can address this issue as a united Parliament, and not in a way that is divided. We should all stand together against this kind of vile threat and this illegal incitement to violence. Our whole Parliament, the police and our communities across the country should want to stand firm with Muslim families and Muslim communities against this kind of vile Islamophobia, because we know from history that an attack on some of us is an attack on all of us. That is why we stand firm.

What has the Home Office done since I raised last week the prevalence of National Action illegal propaganda videos on YouTube—still—and also, I discover, on Twitter and on Facebook? We know that the former counter-terror chief has warned of online radicalisation and the rise of far right extremism, and our Select Committee has heard in our inquiry about the serious issues around Islamophobia and hate crime. The Minister will know that we are allowing social media companies to collude with these far right extremists if action is not taken to take down this kind of vile illegal propaganda.

Victoria Atkins: The right hon. Lady knows the work that the Home Secretary is doing with the large technology companies to improve their reaction. I think that pretty much everyone in this place—and certainly everyone outside—agrees that technology companies need to do more to remove these hateful pieces of incitement from their platforms much more quickly and working with police. I am sure that we have agreement on that.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Will my hon. Friend reassure the House that those spreading this fear and hatred, in whatever forum, should be investigated by the police and, where appropriate, dealt with severely by the courts?

Victoria Atkins: Yes, of course. As I said, I must not comment on this case because it is a live police investigation. The principle is that if there is an incident of hate crime, the victim must—please—report it to the police, so that they can do all they can to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): These letters are abhorrent and are causing immense distress across communities around the country. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) has indicated, this hate crime is being amplified via the internet. Social media companies are still taking too little action. I attended a roundtable co-ordinated by two Departments just before Christmas, but we are still to see action. I can tell the Minister about a case that went to court and a man was jailed for two years for the far right material that he put online. But that material is still online, as remains the case in many examples across the country. What action are the Government taking to ensure that we do not enflame the tensions in our communities by what is seen online?

Victoria Atkins: I know that the hon. Lady has sadly been the victim of much hatred online, as have other Members. We are very clear that it is our expectation that technology companies will, in accordance with the law, remove such material as and when it is brought to their attention. We have had some progress, as the technology companies are getting better at this, but I do not for a moment pretend that we have the full response that we would like, which is to see these posts taken down as quickly as possible. That is the Home Secretary's expectation when she meets the technology companies.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Has a national unit been established to check on hate crime, identify the people who are dealing in it and bring them to justice?

Victoria Atkins: We take the view that hate crime is a matter for the whole community, given that it can take so many forms. It is not restricted to one's religion; the five characteristics are set out clearly in the hate crime legislation. We ensure that the police and others are trained to spot this crime when it occurs and to deal with it seriously and, I hope, sensitively.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): These letters are nothing short of a sick and cowardly attempt to divide our communities. We are proud of our communities living side by side in harmony. A clear message must be sent from across this House that we will never cower before any form of extremism and we will never allow it to threaten the very fabric of our society. May I urge the Minister to ensure that this Government do not sit idly by and let it happen? In this great time of need, allowing the propagation of such awful hatred would send the worst message of all.

Victoria Atkins: I would hope that the hon. Lady has understood from my reaction that the Government are not sitting idly by. We are this year refreshing the hate

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crime action plan because it has to keep up to date with the new threats faced by all different types of people and communities. I can assure her that we take these allegations very seriously—as, indeed, we take very seriously the allegations of anti-Semitism, online hatred and so on that we have heard about in the Chamber today—and that the police do as well.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): The rising tide of creeping Islamophobia and anti-Jewish sentiment should concern us all. How is improving the recording of this hate crime helping us to track what is going on in our society and how we can tackle it?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. Of course, increasing the amount of data helps to give us answers and helps to direct our resources in the right way. We very much hope that disaggregating the different types of hate crime that exist will help individual constabularies to work out how better to prioritise their resources to deal with them.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The level of hate and violence against Muslims has become utterly intolerable. For years, many of our constituencies have faced the onslaught of threats from the English Defence League, Britain First and others. What action will the Minister take, first, to provide protection for the communities who feel particularly under threat on 3 April and in the run-up to 3 April and, secondly, to proscribe groups that are actively seeking to incite violence and hatred across our communities?

Victoria Atkins: Again, the hon. Lady will understand that I must not comment on the investigation going on at the moment, given that it is, by definition, a live investigation. Communities that may be affected by any such communication will be uppermost in the police's mind with regard to protection and their vulnerability. Tackling far right extremism more generally is part of a cross-Government programme that also supports victims of such behaviour. This is where the Prevent strategy, which is a safeguarding programme for people who may be vulnerable to radicalisation, has such an impact, because, sadly, a quarter of the referrals to it in 2015-16 involved far right extremism. The strategy is about trying to lead people away from the path of radicalisation, so that they do not commit these terrible acts.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): This House is at its best when it comes together to condemn evil action and we are not trying to score political points against one another. I think that we can all unite on this letter. We do not yet know who wrote it. For all we know, it is some sad individual in a bedsit playing with his computer, or perhaps it is something far more serious, but we are all right to condemn it as an incitement to violence, especially when it calls on people to throw acid in people's faces.

May I ask the House to think of the office of the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin)? Earlier today, there was an incident in Norman Shaw North that involved him and his staff which may or may not be

connected—but we think it might be—with this letter. We must pull together to ensure that this does not happen, not only here but throughout the country.

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this. I am sure that the thoughts of the whole House are with the Member of Parliament concerned and his members of staff, although I have received a note—I hope that it is accurate—saying that the package found in Norman Shaw North was not hazardous. That must be of significant relief to all those concerned. As ever, we give our sincere thanks to the police and others who went to the rescue of those members of staff when they found the package.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It was Friday night when I started to receive reports from residents in Walthamstow that they had received one of these letters, with the fear and the terror that that caused, at the very point when I was helping other residents to report anti-Semitic graffiti that they had found in our community. Will the Minister join me in welcoming the work that Tell MAMA and the Community Security Trust are doing to support these groups? Does she agree that we have to do more than condemn these individual instances? When we see Steve Bannon come to Europe and tell people that they should be proud to be called a racist, we in this House must speak up for the communities that we represent and the power of diversity and immigration to enrich all our lives. I tell the Minister: the people in Walthamstow need and demand nothing less from this Government.

Victoria Atkins: They are getting it. I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for setting out the concerns of her constituents; she has highlighted the fear that people must have felt when they received those letters. She is absolutely right to say that Tell MAMA is an organisation that is universally recognised as playing a very important role in this field. I am told that from 1 January 2015 to 31 December 2015, 2,622 anti-Muslim hate incidents were reported to Tell MAMA by victims, witnesses, third parties or the police. That shows us the scale—certainly three years ago—of these worrying incidents of hate crime that we are facing in this country. We support Tell MAMA to the tune of £1.9 million, and its work is highly valued.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am keen to accommodate colleagues, but I would just remind the House that there is a further urgent question after this, and then no fewer than four ministerial statements, so there is a premium on extreme brevity from Back and Front Benchers alike.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I, too, condemn the despicable letters that have been sent out. Following a recent incident in my constituency that I would classify as racial abuse, will my hon. Friend reassure my constituent and the whole House that that crime will be classified correctly and not just washed away and classified as a public order offence?

Victoria Atkins: Any such issue will be an operational matter for my hon. Friend's local police force, but I know that she is a good advocate for her local community

and I am sure that she will be asking searching questions of the police and the police and crime commissioner to ensure that that alleged offence receives the attention it deserves.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The Government are right to say that this is a hate crime that has no place in our modern society. I want to pay tribute to our communities in Hounslow, which have a track record of working together to build understanding between all our communities. Will the Minister confirm that the police will have the resources they need to work together effectively and fast across the country to track where these horrific letters are coming from, who is disseminating them and who is behind them, and will she ensure that our schools and communities have the resources they need to stop this activity in its tracks and to support those communities that will rightly feel at risk and under threat?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady has identified the fact that this has an impact not just on the people who receive these letters in their homes but also on the wider neighbourhood. I again ask anyone who has received any of these sorts of communications to please report them to the police. The Home Office is in constant communication with the police to ensure that they have the resources they need to tackle this.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I join my hon. Friend the Minister in condemning these letters. In view of the similarities between anti-Muslim hate crime and the anti-Semitism that we have seen, will she reassure me that the action plan proposed by the Government will be adequate?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. He has a long and established record of supporting our Jewish communities. Yes, the hate crime action plan covers all forms of hatred, as defined by the legislation, and of course, sadly, anti-Semitism forms part of that.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): These appalling letters have to be seen in the context of the flames of prejudice being fanned in mainstream newspapers and in the comments made by mainstream politicians against their Muslim opponents, as well as by bystanders, who are just as complicit when they see prejudice, either in person or online on Facebook or other social media platforms, and instead of tackling it, they choose to look the other way. Will the Minister make a commitment to the House that the Government will not only take action on online publishers of this kind of extremism, but, in the weeks leading up to the first week of April, ensure that every mosque and Muslim community centre in the country receives a visit from their police to give them adequate security advice, to ensure that the Muslim community know that the authorities are 100% with them and on their side?

Victoria Atkins: The anti-Muslim hatred working group brings together all parties from across Government and further afield to try to tackle this specific form of hate crime. One of its initial achievements was to work with the Society of Editors to tackle anti-Muslim hatred and, more recently, with the Independent Press Standards

Organisation to develop training for editors and journalists to tackle the negative portrayal of Muslims in the media.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about ensuring that mosques are visited in the run-up to the date mentioned in the letter, we will happily send letters to each chief constable to ensure they are aware of this. It is a matter for chief constables, but we expect that mosques will be protected.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I join my hon. Friend in condemning these letters and welcome the £2.4 million that the Government have devoted to protecting places of worship from hate crime. Can she expand on how that will work and give assurances that it will be given all the back-up it needs?

Victoria Atkins: I am happy to do that, and it follows on well from the previous question. The Government have committed £2.4 million over three years to help protect places of worship that have been subject to or are vulnerable to a hate crime attack. We hope that that money will help local communities to feel safe in their places of worship.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): You do not have to have taught media studies or be a Muslim to have noticed that anti-Muslim sentiment is becoming quite common in much of our tabloid printed press. As well as dealing with the online platforms that spread this kind of hatred, will the Minister also have a word with her friends in the Tory press? These things feed people like those in Britain First and the English Defence League, one of whom has even made a video calling for my head.

Victoria Atkins: I hope that everyone in the House knows that, as the Minister for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability, I am of course against language that leads to the incitement of violence or hate crime. I hope that this debate has sent a clear message to the people with whom the hon. Lady is concerned.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): As one House, we all find these letters abhorrent, and our constituents will feel exactly the same. Can my hon. Friend assure the House that police forces work collaboratively to tackle such hate crime?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend, who, as always, shows an interest in policing matters. We expect police forces to work collaboratively, particularly in the online field. Of course, online extremism and radicalisation know no geographical boundary, so the police are well versed, sadly, in working together to tackle this form of hatred.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): There has been horror and revulsion at these letters in Cardiff South and Penarth, not just from the Muslim community but across the community. I am very proud of our record in standing up against hate crime across the faiths and across communities in the diverse community in which we live. Does the Minister agree that words from social media companies are now simply not enough? Does she share my deep concern that representatives of Twitter, Google and Facebook

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attended the Home Affairs Committee and said to me that they were not routinely searching for proscribed organisations? That is a basic thing they should be doing. What is she saying to the social media companies?

Victoria Atkins: The Home Secretary is absolutely focused on the conduct of technology companies and the assistance they can give to the police both nationally and locally in taking down this abhorrent material. Sadly, this goes across the line with not just hate crime but online child sexual exploitation, terrorism and so on. A great piece of work is going on at the moment between the Home Secretary and those companies to ensure that their reactions are as speedy as the public expect.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What these letters show more than anything is the gross ignorance, instability, bile and prejudice of the perpetrators, who hide behind the cloak of anonymity. As the Home Affairs Committee report has shown, that anonymity is even more damaging online. Is it not time not just to do more to take this material down once it has been posted but to stop it being posted in the first place and make sure that the identity of the people doing the posting has to be revealed before they have these accounts?

Victoria Atkins: The Home Secretary was in California recently to discuss these matters with the online technology companies. We are looking at the issue of anonymity in terms of the internet safety strategy, because we are very clear that we want the United Kingdom to be the safest place in the world online.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The vile, abhorrent letters received by individuals across the country, including in my constituency, are just the latest addition in a long line of Islamophobic hate crimes. Sadly, the number of such crimes has been growing for several years, encouraged by the undeniable rise of the far right and endorsed directly and indirectly by leaders and powerful figures across the globe. Muslims are often the targets of hate crimes, but the targets can just as easily be those of another religion or another race. With an increase in religious hate crime of 267% since 2011, why has the Government's record on tackling the root causes of hate crime been so poor?

Victoria Atkins: Again, reflecting on the overall tone of this urgent question, I will not rise to the bait, as it were, in that question. Frankly, I think we can all work together to call out hate crime when it happens. We have already today, sadly, heard the forms it can take, including anti-Semitism. Last week, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) spoke about the experience of misogyny; it is not yet a hate crime, but was the cause of much debate last week. We are very clear, and I think the House has been very clear today, that these letters and their sentiments are wholly abhorrent and are to be condemned.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What practical support is being provided to help the targets and victims of hate crime?

Victoria Atkins: First, we of course want victims to report their experience to the police. The police are sadly aware of these events. I hope the police are trusted by the groups of people concerned, who will receive a concerned and sensitive welcome from the police when reporting these crimes. As I have said already, there is much that we are doing in the hate crime action plan, and in trying to tackle the root of radicalisation so that these awful sentiments are not expressed in the first place.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): With the number of anti-Muslim hate crimes and anti-Semitic hate crimes rising at such a shocking rate, these anonymous letters can really strike fear into whole communities. Is it not also the case, however, that anonymous social media is a similar problem on a daily basis? Do we not now have to confront the question of anonymity in spreading such bile? Will the Minister at least address this?

Victoria Atkins: I have very much heard what the House has said. As the hon. Gentleman will know, the internet safety strategy was published last year. I will ensure that the sentiments of the House on anonymity are very much heard by the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): What makes you British is not what you look like, where your parents were from or how you worship, but the contribution that you make to our country. Nowhere has the contribution made by British Muslims been greater than in the west midlands, which is why I will be spending 3 April—it has been identified as a day of hate—visiting as many mosques and community centres across the region as possible to ensure that Muslims in the west midlands have my support and solidarity and to show them that I am on their side. I hope other Members of the House will be doing the same.

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman has set out beautifully the values that bind this House and our country together. I wish him luck on his visits across his constituency to the many mosques in the west midlands.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I welcome the funding that the Minister has promised for safeguarding mosques, but Muslims do not gather only at places of worship. What reassurance can she give the many Muslim community groups, schools and places where children gather—as well as places that are not specifically Muslim, but where there are groups of Muslims—that they will have funding for extra security, should that be needed, in Bristol West?

Victoria Atkins: As I have said, the Government have not only pledged or, indeed, spent up to £2.4 million over three years, but have funded Tell MAMA, which is a very important intelligence tool, as it were, to help the police to understand where they should best focus their resources. If there are particular areas in the hon. Lady's constituency about which she has concerns, I ask her to ensure that her chief constable and her police and crime commissioner know, because they are the ones who must make the operational decisions.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): My constituents are very worried about the rise in hate crime. Is the Minister satisfied that, in light of the significant cuts, Dewsbury and, indeed, West Yorkshire and further afield have the necessary police resources to investigate and apprehend those responsible for this abhorrent crime?

Victoria Atkins: It is about how resources are spent, which is particularly pertinent to the question of West Yorkshire. I cannot recall the figure off the top of my head, but I seem to recall that West Yorkshire has several million pounds of reserves in savings. Of course, how that money is spent is a matter for the elected police and crime commissioner. I very much hope he will take up the Home Office's funding settlement suggestion of increasing council tax to ensure more money to deal with the resourcing issue.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I have been approached by many in my constituency who are deeply concerned about these letters. As with last year's Muslim ban, they feel unfairly targeted and under siege. Although this is an obvious opportunity to target internet companies, social media websites and so on, this was snail mail. May I press the Minister to pick up on the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra)? Will she update us on who sent these letters and what is going on to find out how to stop them? Will she reassure my constituents that once those people are apprehended, they will feel the full weight of the law?

Victoria Atkins: I must not and cannot go into more detail on the specifics of the ongoing police investigation, because the hon. Lady will not want me or anyone else to inadvertently endanger any future prosecution. I can reassure her, however, that the case is being investigated very carefully and that the full force of the law is being applied.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): That anti-Semitic and Islamophobic hate crime is on the rise is well documented, but we also know that there is significant under-reporting—often by women, in my experience. Hijab-wearing Muslim women are often most vulnerable because of their visibility. On the need to reach women in communities and, as my Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debonnaire) has said, not just in mosques, what assurances can the Minister give that the Government are doing what they can to get out into those communities the message about the need to report all incidents of hate crime?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady has hit on a very important point. We must all do what we can to encourage victims of hate crime—whether it is to do with race, religion, disability or gender identity—to report it. Under-reporting is a real issue and I hope that the work of organisations such as Tell MAMA will help people find the wherewithal to report such incidents to the police so that they can be dealt with.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I welcome the fact that we are all united in condemning this despicable attempt to divide our communities. Since 2016, national rhetoric and language have led to a big increase in hate crime.

Will the Government lead by example and encourage everybody to tone down their national language and rhetoric?

Victoria Atkins: Yes.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The Minister has referred several times to the £2.4 million of funding under the Government's anti-hate scheme. She has also said that just 45 places of worship have received funding. Are there any plans to increase the amount of funding and the number of places of worship that will attract funding this year?

Victoria Atkins: May I write to the hon. Lady, because I confess that I am unclear as to whether applications are in train and would not wish in any way to inadvertently answer incorrectly?

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The best way to build belonging, tolerance and relationships is to invest in opportunities for people to come together and learn understanding. Oldham, which does that pretty well, was completely undermined by the Government snatching away the area-based grant in 2010, with no assessment made of the impact that would have on local cohesion in communities. Will the Government take seriously the need to invest at a community level in order to bring people together?

Victoria Atkins: Of course we recognise the importance of bringing communities together, and there are many ways in which to do that. My constituency may enjoy being brought together in a very different way from another constituency elsewhere in the country. I am not clear about the direct impact asserted by the hon. Gentleman in relation to that project, but I will happily write to him about it.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): May I, along with everybody else, condemn this absolutely abhorrent letter? It has been reported that since the EU referendum there has been a spike in hate crime, both in Islamophobia and in anti-Semitism, coming from the hard right and the hard left. It has also been reported by the Crown Prosecution Service that, against that increase in incidents, there was a drop by more than 1,000 in the number of prosecutions in 2016-17. What is the Minister doing with the CPS and the police to ensure that that is reversed?

Victoria Atkins: The drop in referrals, recorded last year, has had an impact on the number of completed prosecutions in 2016 and 2017. The Crown Prosecution Service is working with the police at local and national level to understand the reasons for the overall fall in referrals in the past two years. The message to spread around our constituencies to people who have been a victim of hate crime is please report it, because that way we can try to do something about it.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Police forces such as Greater Manchester that have long targeted hate crime, and who work hard with the CST on anti-Semitism and with the Muslim community on Islamophobia, recognise that community policing is central to challenging

[Tony Lloyd]

hate crime. Will the Minister take that message back? Community policing is about trust, and trust is fundamental. We need our community police.

Victoria Atkins: Of course local policing is important, but we also have to recognise that we cannot just rely on policing alone to reach into communities and build relationships. That is why organisations such as Tell MAMA and others are such an important part of the overall picture in ensuring that when people feel they have been victims of crime they know what to do, know where to go, and feel they will be listened to and their experiences acted upon.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): It is clear that the whole House condemns the cowards who are sending out this letter. However, it is not just those sending this letter who are causing hate and it is not just groups like Britain First. At the end of last month, my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) and I received a letter from the British National party, which included a racist poem. On the back of the letter it said that unless action was taken today

“Rebecca will be in an ethnic minority group when she grows up”

Will the Minister condemn the actions of the BNP and say there should be no place in British society for political parties that peddle such hate?

Victoria Atkins: I am absolutely clear that the BNP and all the other far right organisations described today have no place in our society. Frankly, their showing at the ballot box, when they dare to stand for election, shows how little truck the British public have with them.

Treatment of House of Commons Staff

4.27 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) (Urgent Question): To ask the Leader of the House about the treatment of House of Commons staff.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. She and I worked together on the cross-party working group on an independent complaints and grievance policy. I thank her sincerely for her work on it.

Reports of bullying of House staff are of huge concern to me and to hon. Members right across the House. I am committed to stamping out all kinds of bullying and harassment in Parliament in order to create an environment in which everyone feels safe and is treated with the respect and dignity they deserve. We can only achieve our goals in this House with the support of others. A great debt of gratitude is owed by us all to the House staff who support us behind the scenes.

I myself have worked with a large number of civil servants and staff of the House during my time in Parliament. From the Clerks of the Treasury Committee to my private offices at the Treasury, Energy and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the team in the Leader's office and the excellent secretariat who supported the working group, I have always been impressed by, and am very grateful for, the dedication, professionalism, high standards and courtesy that all the civil servants and House staff have shown. I know that many right hon. and hon. Members across the House, and in the other place, would say the same.

The House will be aware that significant progress has been made in recent months, following the shocking reports at the end of last year of sexual harassment, bullying and intimidation in this place. The working group I chaired, set up by the Prime Minister, has now published its report, and it has been agreed by both Houses. The work streams are now in place to get the new independent complaints procedure up and running within the next three months.

The hon. Lady will recall that the working group wanted House staff to be included in the new complaints procedure from day one. However, following evidence taken, and in consultation with the trade union representatives of House staff, it was agreed that the staff of the House would not immediately be covered by the new independent procedure, because they were already covered by the House's own Respect policy. It was believed that the Respect policy was working well and that House staff were satisfied with it. However, it was acknowledged during the working group evidence sessions that the Respect policy did not cover complaints of sexual harassment and violence. The aspiration of the working group is to take up the question of whether House staff should have immediate access to the new independent complaints procedure now that the report has been agreed by both Houses. Following the “Newsnight” allegations and others, it is clear that the Respect policy may not be sufficient to protect House staff.

I am aware that, today, the Clerk of the House of Commons has written to House staff, saying that there are clearly unresolved issues over bullying and harassment,

including sexual harassment, that need to be addressed, and this will include a review of the Respect policy. The Clerk of the House of Commons has also reassured staff who wish to come forward with complaints of bullying that they will be dealt with in the proper manner, with the support of their managers and colleagues. It is right that everyone working for or with Parliament, regardless of position or seniority, should have the same rights and protections and should be held to the same high standards.

The House Commission next meets on Monday 19 March and I have given notice to my fellow members that I will be recommending a short, independently led inquiry by the House Commission looking into allegations of systemic bullying of parliamentary staff. I will propose that the inquiry should hear from past and current staff members about their experiences and help to provide them with closure wherever possible. I will also propose that it should take soundings from current and former House staff on whether the Respect policy is fit for purpose and whether House staff would be better served by having access to the new independent complaints and grievance policy from day one. Mr Speaker, I am more determined than ever that we banish all kinds of harassment and bullying from this place, because make no mistake, there is a need for change.

Caroline Lucas: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent, cross-party question. This is not about party politics and it is not about political gain; it is about doing the right thing by the staff who support us on a daily basis and ensuring that the House of Commons leads by example when it comes to robustly tackling workplace bullying and sexual misconduct.

Members and the public will have been shocked by the revelations of bullying at Westminster that were highlighted by “Newsnight” last week. I commend the Leader of the House for her ongoing work to establish an independent complaints and grievance procedure. The need for that arose in part because the 2014 Respect policy did not apply to large numbers of those working in Parliament. There are now considerable grounds to assert that that same Respect policy does not have the confidence of the staff that it is intended to protect and that the new independent procedure must immediately be expanded to avoid a two-tier system.

I am grateful that the Leader of the House broadly agrees with that and I am pleased to hear about the new short inquiry, but will she also confirm specifically that there will be a presumption in favour of historical allegations being thoroughly investigated, should those affected choose to make formal complaints, either under the Respect policy or the new procedure? Will she acknowledge that the positive work that she has led to date risks being undermined if we continue to allow sanctions to be determined by a Committee on which MPs effectively hold all the power? Will she agree that the whole process, including sanctions, must be handled by an independent body? Will she revisit whether good employer and consent training as an important part of culture change should start before the next election? I think the evidence is clear that it should, and in the meantime, can she assure staff that any further complaints will be treated with the seriousness and respect that they deserve and will not be dismissed, as they were last Friday, as grotesque exaggeration?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have already mentioned, I certainly agree with the hon. Lady. It was the aspiration of the working group to cover all staff working in Parliament, including staff of the House, in our independent complaints procedure from day one, and I share her concern that we should now take steps to ensure that it does as soon as the independent policy is up and running, which we intend to be the case within three months from now.

The hon. Lady will recall that the working group has made it clear that we will deal with historical allegations, and it will be for the detailed policies and procedures of the new working group to establish how exactly that can be done. The Clerk of the House of Commons has made it clear today that he will look to reassure House staff that any historical allegations will be properly dealt with.

The hon. Lady mentioned that sanctions must be independent. That has been a core part of the work of the working group. We are now looking carefully at how that impacts on the work of the independent Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and the Standards Committee itself, on which there are both parliamentary and lay members, and that work is ongoing. In fact, I am looking forward to meeting the Standards Committee later today to start those discussions.

The hon. Lady mentions consent training. The working group was very clear that all people, not only those who employ staff in this place but those who come into contact with others, should be very clear about what constitutes consent and precisely what does not. I can assure her that I am very keen to provide the carrot to ensure that people want to take up that training, but, as the working group agreed, we did not have the levers at that time to make it compulsory. Finally, I totally share her desire to see all staff here treated with the dignity and respect that everybody in this place deserves.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): May I welcome what the Leader of the House said about her short inquiry? It seems to me that a good test for her to adopt would be to see that the House does what all organisations should do, which is make sure that everybody who works here, whether for Members of Parliament or the House, have the same processes and can expect to be treated according to the same high standards. I urge her to bring in that measure as soon as she can.

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend, and I can assure him and all hon. Members that that is the working group’s aspiration and my personal goal.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): It is noted, Mr Speaker, that you have granted the urgent question, even though you are one of the people mentioned in media reports. No one—critics or otherwise—can deny your commitment to accountability and transparency or your attempts to move the House forward in recognition of diversity and modern customs and practice.

The Opposition take all allegations seriously. We want a workplace that accommodates and supports everyone. I do not want to comment on individual cases—it is a matter for the House authorities—but is

[Valerie Vaz]

the Leader of the House aware of any formal complaints that have been instigated on the basis of those cases that have been reported and, if so, when? I note that she has suggested an inquiry. I am very pleased that we can have this discussion on the Commission and we look forward to that.

Some cases predate the Respect policy, and I know that, as a result of the work streams following the report of the working group on sexual harassment and bullying, that, too, is being amended and there will be a new behaviour code and procedure that covers everyone working on the estate and in our constituencies. It is imperative that all staff working here feel that they can raise any complaints and grievances immediately. Can the Leader of the House confirm that she will agree to the president of the staff side attending the steering group, which I have previously requested and support?

The working group published its report on 8 February 2018. The steering group is monitoring the work that will be carried out. I am pleased that there is now a permanent secretariat and that the further work set out in the report that needs to be done is being progressed to ensure that the complaints and grievance policy that will be put into place is fair and robust. Only when that is tested will we know if they work. There will be a continual process to refine them so that they are effective and everyone has confidence in them. Can the Leader of the House say—she mentioned three months, but we need to balance speed with making sure there is an effective process—whether this work will be completed by the three months, or at least by the summer, before the House rises?

The Labour Opposition take all complaints about sexual harassment and abuse, and discrimination, extremely seriously. We want anyone with a complaint to come forward so that all allegations can be fully investigated, and any appropriate disciplinary action taken in line with the party's procedures.

We all have the utmost respect for the House Clerks. Any of us who have had dealings with them on the various Select Committees, as I have, know that they are experts in their field and offer vital assistance and advice to everyone. I know that everyone who works here, in whatever capacity, knows that they play a vital role in ensuring that our Parliament and our democracy thrive.

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the shadow Leader of the House for what she has said, and I am grateful to her for the part that she played in the working group on setting up an independent complaints procedure. It was notable that there was unanimous support for the establishment of the procedure, and I think the whole House can be very pleased about that.

The hon. Lady asked whether I was aware of specific formal complaints. Consideration of specific complaints was not in the terms of reference of the working group; in fact, it was specifically excluded. In my role as Leader of the House, I have had a number of people come forward to me, and I sought to deal, as I can, wherever possible, with complaints that have been brought to me, but I do not propose to discuss any specific allegations in the Chamber.

The hon. Lady asked about a review of the Respect policy for House staff. In his letter sent to House staff today, the Clerk of the House says:

“there are unresolved issues over bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment, which need to be addressed...we will revisit and renew the Respect policy.”

The hon. Lady asked whether the House authorities trade union representative would be invited to join the steering group. I believe that that has already happened—he has been invited to join the steering group. She asked when the procedures would be finalised. At the first meeting of the steering group last week, we set an aspiration that the bulk of the work should be done within three months. There will be a final vote in the House on necessary changes in Standing Orders, and on the adoption of the behaviour code. We hope and expect that that will happen before the House rises for the summer recess.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): Is it appropriate for Mr Speaker to remain in his place when there are allegations against him, which he is trying to suppress, using taxpayers' funds, by sending letters through Speaker's Counsel?

Andrea Leadsom: I think it vital for all colleagues to join together in supporting the efforts being made by the House to stamp out all bullying and harassment wherever we see it, and to ensure that in future everyone will be treated with the respect and dignity that they deserve.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I heartily congratulate the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) on securing this very important urgent question. She, like me, will find some of the issues that were raised by the BBC's "Newsnight" programme depressingly familiar. It comes as little surprise to any of us who listened to the evidence that we secured on the harassment working group. It was only a matter of time before such issues would emerge, and it is quite surprising that it has been so short.

This endemic culture must be tackled, and I strongly support the call by the Leader of the House for an independent inquiry. Will she tell us a little about how it will be conducted? Does she agree that historical allegations must be considered, and does she support the view that we would be letting down victims past and present if we failed to respond to such allegations? Does she agree that this is all just part of the normalisation of bullying and harassment that continues to poison our politics, amplified by the archaic environment of grandeur and subservience in which we perform our roles as Members of Parliament?

Finally, will the Leader of the House ensure that all members of staff—whether they work for the House or for Members of Parliament—are covered by the new behaviour code, and have access to the new complaints procedure, as quickly as possible?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his part in the working group; he assiduously attended meetings and took a full part in its work, and I am grateful to him for his contribution. He asks how an independent inquiry will be conducted: my intention is to make the proposal to the House Commission, and it will then be a matter for the Commission to agree

whether to do that or not. The House Commission is made up of a number of Members from across the House, including one from the hon. Gentleman's party. However, I would like to see the inquiry carried out by an independent individual who can hear from past and current members of staff of the House, so that person is free of any input from either employers or parliamentarians and people feel they can come forward in confidence.

I completely agree that it would be letting people down if we failed to deal with this, and it is vital that those who have past allegations who feel the time has passed for them to be dealt with seriously can achieve some closure by being able to come forward and be heard in that way. I also agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is demeaning to this House and to all of us if we fail to get a grip on this, and that is why this House has shown such commitment to setting up an independent complaints and grievance policy, which is the right way forward.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I welcome the Leader of the House's statement. Does she agree that sometimes the accused can be victims, too, and that is why it is so important that we have an independent inquiry? Does she also agree that the House of Commons Commission would not be an independent judge or jury, and indeed would not be seen to be such, simply because of the very membership of that Commission, and that it does need to be an independent individual or group of individuals?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and we were very conscious during the working group evidence sessions that it is important to protect both complainants, who are at the heart of the independent complaints procedure, and the alleged perpetrators. It is important that justice is seen to be done and that all parties are properly supported. My hon. Friend is also right that an inquiry led by the House Commission could not be independent, which is why my recommendation to the House Commission will be that it should be an independently led inquiry into allegations of bullying.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): When the Leader of the House chooses, as she has done today, to focus on the thoroughness and decency of the process of dealing with these issues, she will get support from right across this House. She mentioned several times the involvement of trade union representatives, so will she join me in asserting that it is right that members of our staff and members of staff of this House are members of trade unions if they choose to be, and that their representatives ought to be involved at every stage of these processes?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady gives me the opportunity to thank and pay tribute to the very good staff representatives who were on the working group: a representative from Unite, who works as a researcher for a Member of the Labour party; a representative of MAPSA—the Members and Peers Staff Association—who works as a researcher for a Member of the Conservative party; and a representative of the National Union of Journalists, who works for the Scottish nationalists here. They all made a great contribution, and are to be commended on their efforts.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, unfortunately, under the current system House of Commons staff believe that if they make a complaint about bullying or harassment it will not be taken seriously, and, perhaps more insidiously, believe that it will be seriously detrimental to their future career? I welcome the fact that we are going to have an independent investigation into the allegations we heard on “Newsnight”. When will that start and when will it complete?

Andrea Leadsom: The House Commission meets next Monday; I will be making that recommendation there, and the investigation will start as soon as possible.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I think it is a matter of common accord that the House is exceptionally well served by the Clerk staff, so I hope it goes without saying that these complaints require to be investigated with rigour, in a comprehensive way and independently. Mr Speaker, when you and I first entered the House, it was almost entirely self-regulating. The position today is very different, but that change has been piecemeal. What is now required is a proper comprehensive reconsideration of the question of parliamentary privilege and self-regulation. I welcome the short independent inquiry that the Leader of the House seeks to establish, but once that is done she should apply her mind to revisiting the work of the Joint Committee set up in 1998 to look at the question of the extent and definition of parliamentary privilege.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman makes an interesting observation, and I will certainly look into it.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Does the Leader of the House agree that every individual complaint made against a Member reflects badly on each and every one of us? Given the “Newsnight” allegation that the policy was simply not up to scratch, and that it was certainly something that we decided among ourselves, does she agree that we need not only an independent investigation, but an external independent body to establish our future policy?

Andrea Leadsom: I hope I can reassure my hon. Friend that the independent grievance policy that we are in the process of establishing will ensure that the culture in this place changes to the benefit of all who work here. Many hon. Members are troubled by the allegations. It is, as ever, a small minority of people who behave badly, and he is right to point out that it demeans all of us when a few of us behave badly.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Having been in the House quite a long time, I recall that, in the early days, the warnings to young women in the House were about not just a small group of Members of Parliament, but some senior Clerks who were known to be bullies. I was chair of the all-party parliamentary group on bullying for some years and have been fighting everyone's corner, and I have never known a Speaker as strong on reform in that particular part of our lives. I urge the Leader of the House to get on with things quickly. We want justice to be done and to be seen to be done.

[Mr Barry Sheerman]

The inquiry should know that a tiny minority of Members have used this like a new form of McCarthyism by naming someone and putting them into purgatory. People on both sides of the House have been affected, but there has been no redress. Dreadful things have happened to them and their families, probably including things that we do not know about. There is a danger of a new kind of political McCarthyism, and we must stamp it out.

Andrea Leadsom: I remind the hon. Gentleman that the independent complaints procedure will be exactly that. It will be independent and confidential, so that complainants, who often do not want to come forward for fear of then having to deal with the person they are accusing, can come forward in confidence. The alleged perpetrator will also be able to have their side of the story heard in confidence. Natural justice rules will therefore apply to the entire process, but there will also be serious sanctions for wrongdoing. I genuinely believe that this work will change the culture in Parliament, take us to a new stage where people can come forward, and make people think twice about some of their attitudes.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I appreciate that there may be problems with definition, that many cases will not have been investigated and that details will often be sketchy at best at this stage, but can the Leader of the House give an indication of the scale of the problem? How many cases of abuse of House or Members' staff have been brought to her attention in her recent dealings?

Andrea Leadsom: I do not think that I can give my hon. Friend an idea of the scale of the problem. Different cases have appeared in the media, and it is difficult to understand the enormity and range of the problem. Suffice it to say, we are determined to see change for the better across the House.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the emphasis that the Leader of the House has placed on due process and the principles of justice. Complainants must be taken seriously, but the person who has been complained about also has rights, and it is important that cases should be heard on the basis of evidence. Will she also say a word about the independent Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, who hears complaints about hon. Members and can then put them to the Standards Committee? That route needs to be somehow incorporated into the new process that she envisages.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right, and indeed that is part of the process. Very specifically, an independent complaint is heard in confidence; if there is a finding against the alleged perpetrator, in the case of a Member of Parliament being complained about, that would go to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, who would either carry out an appeal and look at the evidence again, or find against the Member, or find that there was no cause to answer. She will have expanded sanctions at a lower level, or indeed she will pass it on to the Committee on Standards so that it can consider the matter, including

recommending suspension to the House, which could lead to the Recall of Members of Parliament Act 2015 being invoked.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Leader of the House agree that any member of staff who feels that he or she has been bullied must have an absolute guarantee that their career will not suffer in any way if they make a complaint? If they have that guarantee, does she agree that the reputation of Members of Parliament should not be sullied by accusations that they are bullies unless a complaint against them has been made?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend sums up the position very well. It is vital that complainants are protected so that they can come forward in confidence and not be further victimised, but it is also essential that people who are complained about have the opportunity to put their side of the story and receive proper justice.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I commend the Leader of the House, her counterparts and you as well, Mr Speaker, on the response to these issues so far. Does the Leader of the House agree that this is a moment for each and every one of us to reflect on our behaviour, and that we should constantly reflect on our behaviour, because the critical issue is not what we judge or deem to be the appropriate behaviour, but how we make others feel? That is why the independent nature of the right hon. Lady's proposals is critical, because this process has to be without political fear or favour, or political campaigns against opponents or anyone else, so that people can come forward.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is exactly right. The power dynamic—the idea that how we behave is not necessarily how we are seen to behave—is incredibly important. Certainly, in working group evidence, we took a lot of witness statements about exactly that, and it is vital that we take that into account.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Due process sometimes takes a very long time. May I ask the Leader of the House to ensure that due process should be as speedy as possible in the interests of everyone?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. We are quite proud that we moved very quickly with the independent complaints procedure, but at the same time we are doing a thorough job, and that is our plan.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Every industrial tribunal has to be registered under the Ministry of Justice. In the interests of transparency, will the Leader of the House publish all industrial tribunal applications that have been registered against Members of Parliament, or indeed against the House of Commons?

Andrea Leadsom: I do not believe that that will be a matter for me, but I will certainly look into it.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): May I put on record my support for the work that the Leader of the House, you Mr Speaker, and all members of the working group have done since November on this issue?

Does the right hon. Lady agree that we need to take the politics out of this altogether? If people are to have confidence that we are truly listening, that victims will be believed and that we will have a proper process, it is time for professionals—not the press or political expediency—to lead that.

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with the hon. Lady. The independence is absolutely vital.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I can assure you, Mr Speaker, that I have great respect for all staff I work with. I was the guinea pig in 2012 after a difficult phone-hacking report, for the original Respect policy. I was flayed by selective leaking six years ago, and it has happened again now. I ask the Leader of the House and hon. Members, before they jump to judgment after what was a very one-sided, selective BBC broadcast, to approach the cases that have been raised in a more balanced way, to consider the reasons why the original Respect policy was scrapped in the first place as not fit for purpose, and to give consideration to the disparity of support for MPs who are complained against, especially when complainants have the backing of the resourceful and very well-resourced First Division Association in particular? Finally, may I ask the House to consider why old, historical allegations like this are being selectively recycled now, and by whom, because whatever is at play this is not a game for reputations or families?

Andrea Leadsom: The advantage of an independent complaints procedure is that it will exist for people to be able to come forward with confidence and with confidentiality. That means that at long last they will have somewhere they can go to make their complaint without just going straight to the press, which, as the hon. Gentleman says, has caused some difficulties.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The working group report recommends training by the end of this Parliament. Clearly, that is inappropriate. Will the Leader of the House bring it forward to ensure that every Member and manager has face-to-face training within this year?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is not quite right about that: the working group proposes that training is essential for all Members across the House in a wide variety of areas, and measures are being brought forward to encourage people to undertake training. We have said that in their induction new Members in the next Parliament will receive compulsory training in certain areas.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Will the Leader of the House clarify something: if a House of Commons staff member raises a complaint today, or in the next few days, under what policy or procedure would that complaint be dealt with?

Andrea Leadsom: Currently, members of House staff who are making allegations of bullying or inappropriate behaviour will come under the House Respect policy, which was established a few years back. What the working group is creating is an independent complaints procedure. The House staff were not going to be subject to, or able to take advantage of, the independent complaints procedure, and we now want to look at that again.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I have huge respect for the staff of this House—whether they work in our catering department or the Clerks department, my experiences of them have been excellent—but may I add my voice to those who are calling for absolute due process in this? We need to respect the complainant and the complained against; that is the only way to deal with allegations of this nature. Will the Leader of the House join me in issuing a word of caution to Members of this House about conducting these matters in the media, whether off the record or on it, not least because that might prejudice any process or give the impression that it is politicised or personalised in its approach?

Andrea Leadsom: The working group put the complainant at the heart of this procedure, and what was very clear from the evidence we took was that people will come forward only if they feel they will be treated in confidence and they will not then be plastered all over the front of the newspapers.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Bullying and harassment occur in all walks of life and in all professions. What is important is that the person is listened to and the matter is investigated independently, but I say strongly that we must also remember the golden thread that runs through our English law: someone is innocent until proven guilty.

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, and the laws of natural justice have certainly been applied to the new independent complaints procedure.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): When I was a Unite rep in the NHS, I represented members on both sides of bullying and harassment cases. One thing that would have made my job as a workplace rep very difficult would have been having a two-tier system in operation. Will the Leader of the House assure us that she will move towards a single system, a robust policy and equal trade union recognition for everyone who works in this House?

Andrea Leadsom: I can certainly tell the hon. Lady that it was the working group's ambition that all those who work here would have access to the independent complaints procedure. As I have said to other hon. Members, it is our intention to look at that again.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Even today, the vast majority of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students in school will at some point or other in their school career face horrific instances of bullying, which is why they are six times more likely than their straight counterparts to take their own lives. Many schools have said, "Oh, let's build a tolerant school," but to homosexuals that sometimes feels as though we are being tolerated—we are being put up with. Is the key word not "respect"—respect for one another, whatever our political views, whatever our gender, whatever religious views we have or whatever any part of our background? The only way we are going to be able to change that culture in here is if we make sure that every single one of us is fully and properly trained, not only the first time we come into this House, but every time we are returned by our voters.

Andrea Leadsom: I do agree with the hon. Gentleman that respect is key. We are determined to achieve in Parliament a workplace environment that is among the best in the world and that treats everybody with the respect and dignity that they deserve.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Mr Speaker, we have known each other since long before either of us was elected to this place and I think it is fair to say that we have had strong and heated disagreements about lots of issues over the years, so I certainly could not be described as a cheerleader by any means, but I do think that there has to be a fair and proper process in all this. It cannot be based on anonymous briefings to the press, it cannot be based on political disagreements, and it cannot be based on score-settling, either.

Andrea Leadsom: I say again that the whole purpose of an independent complaints and grievance policy is to ensure that there is justice for the complainant and for the person alleged to have carried out the wrongdoing.

Salisbury Incident

5.6 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on the incident in Salisbury and the steps we are taking to investigate what happened and to respond to this reckless and despicable act.

Last week, my right hon. Friends the Foreign and Home Secretaries set out the details of events as they unfolded on Sunday 4 March. I am sure that the whole House will want to pay tribute again to the bravery and professionalism of our emergency services and armed forces in responding to this incident, as well as the doctors and nurses who are now treating those affected. In particular, our thoughts are with Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey, who remains in a serious but stable condition. In responding to this incident, he exemplified the duty and courage that define our emergency services and in which our whole nation takes the greatest pride.

I want to pay tribute to the fortitude and calmness with which people in Salisbury have responded to these events and to thank all those who have come forward to assist the police with their investigation. The incident has, of course, caused considerable concern across the community. Following the discovery of traces of nerve agent in a Zizzi restaurant and the Mill pub, the chief medical officer issued further precautionary advice, but, as Public Health England has made clear, the risk to public health is low.

I share the impatience of the House and the country at large to bring those responsible to justice and to take the full range of appropriate responses against those who would act against our country in this way. But as a nation that believes in justice and the rule of law, it is essential that we proceed in the right way, led not by speculation but by the evidence. That is why we have given the police the space and time to carry out their investigation properly. Hundreds of officers have been working around the clock, together with experts from our armed forces, to sift and assess all the available evidence, to identify crime scenes and decontamination sites and to follow every possible lead to find those responsible. That investigation continues and we must allow the police to continue with their work.

This morning, I chaired a meeting of the National Security Council in which we considered the information available so far. As is normal, the council was updated on the assessment and intelligence picture, as well as on the state of the investigation. It is now clear that Mr Skripal and his daughter were poisoned with a military-grade nerve agent of a type developed by Russia. It is part of a group of nerve agents known as Novichok.

Based on the positive identification of this chemical agent by world-leading experts at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory at Porton Down, our knowledge that Russia has previously produced this agent and would still be capable of doing so, Russia's record of conducting state-sponsored assassinations and our assessment that Russia views some defectors as legitimate targets for assassinations, the Government have concluded that it is highly likely that Russia was responsible for the act against Sergei and Yulia Skripal. There are, therefore, only two plausible explanations for what happened in Salisbury on 4 March: either this was

a direct act by the Russian state against our country; or the Russian Government lost control of their potentially catastrophically damaging nerve agent and allowed it to get into the hands of others.

This afternoon, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has summoned the Russian ambassador to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and asked him to explain which of the two possibilities it is and to account for how this Russian-produced nerve agent could have been deployed in Salisbury against Mr Skripal and his daughter. My right hon. Friend has stated to the ambassador that the Russian Federation must immediately provide full and complete disclosure of the Novichok programme to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, and he has requested the Russian Government's response by the end of tomorrow.

This action has happened against a backdrop of a well-established pattern of Russian state aggression. Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea was the first time since the second world war that one sovereign nation has forcibly taken territory from another in Europe. Russia has fomented conflict in the Donbass, repeatedly violated the national airspace of several European countries and mounted a sustained campaign of cyber-espionage and disruption, which has included meddling in elections and hacking the Danish Ministry of Defence and the Bundestag, among many others.

During his recent state of the union address, President Putin showed video graphics of missile launches, flight trajectories and explosions, including the modelling of attacks on the United States with a series of warheads impacting in Florida. The extra-judicial killing of terrorists and dissidents outside Russia was given legal sanction by the Russian Parliament in 2006, and, of course, Russia used radiological substances in its barbaric assault on Mr Litvinenko. We saw promises to assist the investigation then, but they resulted in denial and obfuscation and the stifling of due process and the rule of law.

Following Mr Litvinenko's death, we expelled Russian diplomats, suspended security co-operation, broke off bilateral plans on visas, froze the assets of the suspects and put them on international extradition lists, and those measures remain in place. Furthermore, our commitment to collective defence and security through NATO remains as strong as ever in the face of Russian behaviour. Indeed, our armed forces have a leading role in NATO's enhanced forward presence, with British troops leading a multinational battlegroup in Estonia. We have led the way in securing tough sanctions against the Russian economy, and we have at all stages worked closely with our allies and will continue to do so. We must now stand ready to take much more extensive measures.

On Wednesday, we will consider in detail the response from the Russian state. Should there be no credible response, we will conclude that this action amounts to an unlawful use of force by the Russian state against the United Kingdom, and I will come back to this House to set out the full range of measures that we will take in response.

This attempted murder using a weapons-grade nerve agent in a British town was not just a crime against the Skripals, but an indiscriminate and reckless act against the United Kingdom, putting the lives of innocent civilians at risk. We will not tolerate such a brazen attempt to murder innocent civilians on our soil. I commend this statement to the House.

5.13 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for an advance copy of her statement on this deeply alarming attack, which raises very serious questions. The whole House condemns the suspected poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Salisbury and, of course, we wish them a return to good health. I am sure that the whole House will join me in wishing Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey a speedy recovery as well. No member of our police force and nobody on the streets of Britain should ever face such an attack—let alone one with chemical weapons.

I thank the Prime Minister for updating the House. The investigation into the shocking events in Salisbury must reach its conclusions. We need to see both the evidence and a full account from the Russian authorities in the light of the emerging evidence to which the Prime Minister referred. For now, can the Prime Minister clarify what level of threat it was believed that Mr Skripal faced at the time of the attack and what security protection, if any, was deemed necessary for him and his daughter?

This morning, the Conservative Chair of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs said that he would be “surprised” if the Prime Minister “did not point the finger at the Kremlin”.

The hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) also accused the Russian Government of behaving “aggressively” and in “a corrupting way” in this country.

We need to continue seeking a robust dialogue with Russia on all the issues—both domestic and international—currently dividing our countries, rather than simply cutting off contact and letting the tensions and divisions get worse and, potentially, even more dangerous.

We are all familiar with the way in which huge fortunes, often acquired in the most dubious circumstances in Russia and sometimes connected with criminal elements, have ended up sheltering in London and trying to buy political influence in British party politics—“meddling in elections”, as the Prime Minister put it. There have been more than £800,000 of donations to the Conservative party from Russian oligarchs and their associates. If that is the evidence before the Government, they could be taking action to introduce new financial sanctions powers even before the investigation into Salisbury is complete. But instead they are currently resisting Labour's amendments to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill that could introduce the so-called Magnitsky powers. Will the Prime Minister agree today to back those amendments? More specifically—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. There can be strongly held opinions and inflamed passions, but I appeal to colleagues, whose sincerity and integrity I do not doubt, to remember that we hear views. Other colleagues will be heard, but the right hon. Gentleman must be heard now.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

More specifically, when it comes to the Salisbury attack, what actions are the local police taking to identify fellow diners at the Zizzi restaurant and the Mill pub in Salisbury on the day in question and to ensure that they come forward and are checked? What extra resources are being provided to the local police force, which quite understandably has never had to deal with such an incident before?

[Jeremy Corbyn]

We know that the national health service is under incredible pressures across the country, but what extra resources have been provided to the NHS hospitals in and around Salisbury, and what training has been given to NHS staff and GPs in identifying the symptoms of a nerve agent attack?

The events in Salisbury on 4 March have appalled the country and need thorough investigation. The local community and public services involved need reassurance and the necessary resources. The action that the Government take once the facts are clear needs to be both decisive and proportionate, and focused on reducing conflict and tensions, rather than increasing them.

I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to the magnificent work of our public services responding to this attack: the NHS staff, the police and security services, the armed forces and the analysts at Porton Down. Let us do everything we can to ensure that this never ever happens again.

The Prime Minister: I am sure that everybody in the whole House sends their best wishes to all those who have suffered as a result of this incident and wish for their recovery. In the case of Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey, I read a quote that I was not surprised by because I have heard it from so many police officers who have been in dangerous situations before; he said that he was merely doing his job. We are grateful to him and all our police officers and emergency services for doing that. We do not comment on the threats in relation to individual cases, but of course the police and others always look to ensure that we are taking these matters fully into account and taking them very seriously.

In relation to Russia, we have a very simple approach, which is, “Engage but beware.” This shows how right it is that this Government have been cautious in relation to its arrangements with Russia. In my Mansion House speech last November, I set out very clearly the concerns that we have about the activities of Russia. It is a matter that I have discussed with fellow leaders at the European Union Council. We must all be very well aware of the various ways in which Russia is affecting activity across the continent and elsewhere. There can be no question of business as usual with Russia.

The right hon. Gentleman raised the issue of party donations. I will say two things to him. First, as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer said at the weekend, you should not tar everybody who lives in this country of Russian extraction with the same brush. Secondly, there are rules on party political donations, and I can assure him that my party and, I hope, all parties follow those rules.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about Magnitsky powers. I have been challenged previously on this question. We do already have some of the powers that are being proposed in relation to the Magnitsky law. However, we have already been talking with all parties about the amendment that has been put down, and we will work with others to ensure that we have the maximum possible consensus before the Report stage.

The right hon. Gentleman raised the question of police capabilities and resources. Not only are Wiltshire police involved in this, but they have support from neighbouring forces, as would normally happen when

an incident takes place which requires that extra capability. But crucially, at a very early stage, it was decided that counter-terrorism police should take over the responsibility for this because the counter-terrorism police network has capabilities that are not available to regional forces, and they are indeed in charge in relation to this.

I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that Wiltshire County Council and Salisbury City Council are working with Public Health England, with the NHS locally and with the police to ensure that there is maximum information available to members of the public—the chief medical officer has herself reassured members of the public that the public health risk is low—and to ensure that the proper arrangements are being put in place to help the police to get on with their inquiries. That is important. The police are still working on investigating this, and we should ensure that they have the time and space to be able to conduct those investigations.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): May I commend my right hon. Friend for rising to this occasion as she should? Many in this House would wish that the Leader of the Opposition had abandoned party politics and done just the same.

My right hon. Friend is quite right: if the response from the Russian ambassador is simply not credible, she is right to expect the House to back her in taking the most severe action as is required and commensurate. She is also right to remind the House, and the country, that this country—Russia—is now as close to being a rogue state as any. It occupies Crimea; it has helped to occupy eastern Ukraine; and it has created a hell on earth in Syria, and is even now overseeing worse action. This is a country locking up its members of the opposition. Frankly—we have learned this lesson before—if we appease a country like this, we can expect even worse.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his remarks. He is absolutely right. Nobody should be in any doubt about the various activities that the Russian state is involved in across the continent of Europe and elsewhere and the damage that that is doing in so many different places. He is absolutely right that that is why it is important that this Government—this country—stand up very clearly and not only call out actions by Russia but also ensure that we have a robust response to them.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for giving me an advance copy of her statement. I share her concerns about the recent attack on Salisbury. It is important that we all work together to get to the bottom of what has happened there. There can be no denying that this assassination attempt on Mr Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia is not only a step too far by those responsible; it also calls into question every aspect of our current and future relationship with Russia. This ruthless action not only put at risk the lives of our emergency services but threatened the safety of the wider public who were enjoying a Sunday afternoon in the cathedral city of Salisbury. Everyone has the right to live in the UK in security and safety, and any challenge to that right needs to be responded to in an appropriate manner. The police have so far identified more than 200 witnesses and 240 pieces of evidence in the attempted killing.

All our thoughts are with Nick Bailey and his family, and we wish him a speedy recovery. We commend the emergency services for putting their lives on the line in order to defend all of us. However, there are legitimate concerns around the delay in time between the events on Sunday 4 March and yesterday, when the chief medical officer advised the public who had been at the restaurant and at the pub to wash their clothing and personal items. Can the Prime Minister give reassurances today to those members of the public who have real concerns that they might have been exposed to the effects of the nerve agent used?

I welcome the actions detailed in the Prime Minister's statement. May I ask her when she intends to return to the House to update us on the measures that we can all take? Firm and strong action must be taken to send a clear message to the Kremlin that we will not accept Russian interference in our democracy or in our way of life. I hope that she will take the time to raise this matter with colleagues across the EU, our closest allies, to help to give us a strong voice when we all say, as one, that this kind of international outrage must never be seen again on our streets.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the tone that he has adopted in his response to the statement. This is indeed a matter that should concern us all; it is a matter of national interest. An attack has taken place, and we must respond to it appropriately, as he has said. He asked about the chief medical officer's most recent advice to those who had been in the Zizzi restaurant or in the pub. The answer to that is that, over the course of time last week, as work was being done on this issue, more information became available about the nature of the agent that had been used. That led to that precautionary advice being given yesterday. The right hon. Gentleman also asked when I would be returning to the House. As I said in my statement, we will consider in detail the response from the Russian state on Wednesday, and I will return to the House at the earliest possible opportunity.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): This, if not an act of war, was certainly a warlike act by the Russian Federation, and it is not the first that we have seen. Some in this House have stayed silent or decided to join the information warfare that that state is conducting against us and our allies, but we have seen it invade countries in the east, attack allies and attempt to kill Prime Ministers. Even now, it is backing the murderous Assad regime which thinks nothing of gassing its own people, yet the right hon. Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition stays silent. Does my right hon. Friend agree that now is the time for us to call on our allies—the European Union, which has worked with us so well on sanctions, NATO and particularly the United States—and ask what they will do to assist us in this moment when we are in need?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we should be giving a robust response from the whole of this House to this incident—this act that has taken place. There have already been a number of engagements with our allies on this particular matter, and we will continue to talk to them to ensure that they are aware of what has happened on British soil and that we can talk with them about the response that we will be giving.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Does the Prime Minister agree that one of the most effective ways of punishing Russia for these appalling activities would be to seize the private property assets of members of the Putin regime and its associates? As a first step, could she arrange to publish a list of who they are and what they own?

The Prime Minister: Of course, we are aware of the need in the United Kingdom to ensure that our financial system cannot be used for illicit money flows, that appropriate action is taken by law enforcement and other bodies to ensure that we identify such flows and that we make the appropriate response to them. As the right hon. Gentleman will know, we are already putting in place a number of measures to improve the information that is available in a transparent way in relation to the holding of certain assets here by those from overseas, and that is something we will continue to work on.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I entirely agree with the Prime Minister's approach to this murderous attack. She will be aware, as she has stated, that it is part of a pattern of behaviour by which a state uses covert means in breach of both international law and the rule of law to attack with impunity whoever it wishes. In those circumstances, does she agree that we face a very particular challenge that is not likely to go away any time soon? In that context, in trying to inform the public of the risks and of the appropriate way of responding for a parliamentary democracy, can I encourage her to make use of the Intelligence and Security Committee, which chose to carry out an inquiry into Russia's threat last autumn, so that we can take that forward and provide as much information as we can publicly about the nature of the threat and the best means of responding to it?

The Prime Minister: It was very good that the ISC had already announced that it would be considering issues around Russian activity against the UK that requires investigation. I look forward to the work that my right hon. and learned Friend's Committee will be doing on that, and the Government will work with the ISC to share relevant information that is within its remit.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement. It is hard to see any alternative to her grave conclusion that either this was a direct act by the Russian state against our country or the Russian Government have lost control of a dangerous nerve agent. In that context, I hope the whole House will be able to come together behind a firm response from the Government in the interests of our national security and public safety. Can I therefore ask her whether the National Security Council has asked for a review of the 14 other cases that I wrote to the Home Secretary about to see whether any of those should be investigated? Can I also press her on what further action she has taken in preparation for potential UN Security Council resolutions that should be drafted in order to get the widest possible international support?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right about the need for a clear response from the whole House, and everybody in the House should be in no doubt of the nature of what has happened and that we should respond robustly to it. I understand that my

[*The Prime Minister*]

right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has responded to her letter in relation to those 14 other cases. I think the focus at the moment should be on ensuring that resources are put into this criminal investigation, so that the police are able to do their work with the maximum time and space.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Prime Minister recall that when Edward Heath expelled more than 100 Russian so-called diplomats in the early 1970s, it gave a blow to Russian intelligence operations against this country from which it did not recover until the end of the cold war? Does she also recall that when it was clear that a member of the Libyan embassy staff—which one was unknown—had killed WPC Yvonne Fletcher, a wholesale expulsion of staff occurred then? As it would be impossible for an operation to have been mounted by the Russian state without someone in the London Russian embassy knowing about it, does she therefore conclude that similar measures may well be necessary?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend. As I said in my statement, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has called the Russian ambassador into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office today and presented the two possibilities of the origin of this action to him. We wait for the Russian state's response. I am very clear that, should that response not be credible, we will conclude that this action is an unlawful use of force by the Russian state against the United Kingdom, and as I said earlier, I will come back to the House and set out the full range of measures that we will take in response.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Naturally, there is the most intense interest in this extraordinarily grave matter, and I am keen to accommodate colleagues. May I ask colleagues to help me to help each of them by confining themselves to pithy questions?

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the Prime Minister agree that, in the face of yet further aggression from the Russian mafia state, the policy of the Leader of the Opposition of engaging in robust dialogue will only encourage Putin to engage in further acts of state-sponsored terror? Does she agree that in the national interest, and regardless of the cost to this country, the only effective answer is to take robust action against those who are using the UK as a battleground in which to carry out their own acts of assassination?

The Prime Minister: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that we need to ensure that we do in fact respond robustly to this matter, but we need to do so having given careful consideration to the assessments that have been made and the information that is available to us, and that is exactly what the Government are doing. Nobody in this House should be in any doubt that there can be no suggestion of business as usual in relation to our interaction with Russia.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The whole country will welcome the precise and clear statement that the Prime Minister has delivered to the House this

afternoon. In particular, she has set out precisely what she will do in terms of laying out the evidence for the international community and the United Nations about the act that has been perpetrated on British soil. May I also welcome the comments she made about the so-called Magnitsky amendment? Many of us on both sides of the House of Commons believe that this could make a big contribution, and I hope that she will continue to consider following America, Canada and three European countries in introducing such an amendment.

The Prime Minister: I recognise that my right hon. Friend is supporting the amendment and has been working on this issue. I say to him, as I have previously, that we want to ensure that we get the maximum possible consensus across the House on this particular issue. [*Interruption.*] We will talk to the parties involved to ensure that the approach taken is one that—[*Interruption.*] The shadow Foreign Secretary keeps saying, “There is an amendment down.” There is an amendment down, and discussions are taking place with parties about the impact of the amendment as currently drafted. We will ensure that any action taken will be action that we can be sure will work.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): May I commend the Prime Minister for today making the sort of resolute and realistic statement about the Kremlin that many of us have been looking for in this House for some time? Will she invite the heroic and brave Bill Browder, who has done more than any other single individual to uncover the Kremlin's methods, to give her a full briefing about what he knows of Putin's cronies' money-laundering exploits in London and the British political figures who have been corrupted by Kremlin money? Will she also make sure that the whole of the Government machinery is now giving full co-operation to Robert Mueller's inquiry in the United States, because of what he has already uncovered about what the Russians have been doing here?

The Prime Minister: We have already been clear, in relation to the Mueller inquiry, that we will of course respond to appropriate requests. I am told that the other individual to which the right hon. Gentleman referred has actually already met the Security Minister, and has therefore been able to brief him on what he knows.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Friends from especially Scandinavia, the Baltics and across eastern Europe have often told me how much they feel increasingly at risk from the rise in Russian aggression. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on how we will work with our allies in response to this incident?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am very conscious that those who are, particularly geographically, close to Russia on the European continent very much feel the immediacy of many of the activities that Russia gets involved in, particularly, for example, matters of propaganda use. I will certainly be speaking to a number of our allies. It is important that people recognise not only what has taken place here in the United Kingdom, but, if it is a Russian state activity, the implications it has for Russia's activities elsewhere on the continent of Europe.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Can I also commend the Prime Minister for her remarks? The last time we had a clear, defined, state-sponsored act of terrorism was in 2006, and she has referred to that. Can she have conversations with her predecessor, Tony Blair, who was Prime Minister at that time, about some of the issues that arose subsequent to the actions we took, because it is clear that the Russians will retaliate and we will then be in a tit-for-tat process? They think we will back down. We have to say, resolutely and strongly, that we are not backing down. This is an act of terrorism and all Members of Parliament should stand together.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. When we take action, we must ensure that it is action that we will continue to follow through. As I said in my statement, many of the actions taken in response to the Litvinenko murder are actually still in place in relation to our relations with the Russian state. Nobody should be in any doubt, however, of the likelihood of an impact from the Russian state in attempting to suggest, as it did in that case, that the information we put out is incorrect. The inquiry, which followed significantly later, very firmly put the responsibility for Litvinenko's murder at the door of the Russian state and, indeed, of President Putin.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): May I commend the Prime Minister for the robust tone of her statement, which is entirely appropriate? Does she accept that, while we may not be in a period of cold war with Russia, as we were in the 1980s, it could be said that, because of its actions, we are at least now entering a period of cool war? If that be so, would she be prepared, at the appropriate time, to look again at our ability to deter Russia and at the resources we may require to do so?

The Prime Minister: As I have said previously, there is no question of business as usual with Russia. We must be very clear about the actions it has taken. This incident proves that the actions we have taken over the past decade have been entirely justified. What we see is a Kremlin that seems to be intent on dismantling the international rules-based order, and we should stand up resolutely in defence of that international order.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): The evidence that the Prime Minister has provided today makes it absolutely clear that the onus is on the Russian state to explain how this nerve agent entered our country. I thank her for her answer to my colleague, the Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee. It is absolutely essential that we can, where possible, ensure that the public are aware of the Russian threat. Does she also agree that our inquiry should be able to understand the pressures on our intelligence and security services, and how best they are supported to do the job they have to do?

The Prime Minister: Of course, it is for the ISC itself to determine the breadth of the inquiries it undertakes within the remit that it has been set by this House and by Government. Extra resources are being put into the security and intelligence agencies because we have recognised the increasing challenges and threats that we need to address. That is why significant resources are going into the single intelligence account.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Given the grisly fate of so many of President Putin's opponents, both at home and abroad, including even those with a high profile such as Boris Nemtsov, no one in this House, least of all the Leader of the Opposition, should have any doubt of the nature of the Government with whom we are dealing. Having said that, and while I support all the measures the Prime Minister will take against the Government of Russia if the situation turns out to be as we all anticipate, will she try, as far as is possible, to ensure that British society, in its widest sense, can continue to be open with the people of Russia so that the virus of truth and openness can do its work on that regime?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. We are talking about the dealings the UK Government and this country have with the Russian state. It is important that people in Russia understand the exact nature of the regime in government there at the moment.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I do not suppose there is a single Member who is surprised that President Putin would resort to violence, because he has done it so many times before: 334 killed in the Beslan massacre; 170 killed unnecessarily in the Moscow theatre siege; 299 killed on flight MH17, the aeroplane brought down by the Russians; countless journalists and countless people who stood up to him as political opponents in other countries around the world murdered by him; and, yes, Sergei Magnitsky. I hear what the Prime Minister says, but may I just ask—this is the 29th time I have asked this question—whether we can ensure that, at the end of this process, nobody involved in the murder of Sergei Magnitsky, or in the corruption that he unveiled, will be allowed into this country? For that matter, can we just stop Russia Today broadcasting its propaganda in this country?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has asked me the question about the Magnitsky issue on many occasions in this House, both when I was Home Secretary and subsequently. We already have a number of powers that enable us to take action against individuals to prevent them from coming into this country, but we are looking seriously at the amendments. As I said, we want to ensure we have maximum consensus on this issue. On further action the Government might take, I will return to the House at the earliest possible opportunity, once we have a response from the Russian state, to update the House on the further measures we will take.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): If one permanent member of the UN Security Council carries out a targeted assassination in the country of another, surely it is time for the UN Secretary-General to launch an immediate inquiry.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his suggestion. The United Nations is one of the bodies, along with other allies and other organisations such as NATO, we will be speaking to about the nature of the incident that has taken place here in the United Kingdom. We will certainly be raising this matter with the UN.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): While the investigations are ongoing, we are waiting for a response from the Russian Government. May I ask

[Luciana Berger]

the Prime Minister what her Government are doing to protect other people who might be targeted here in the UK?

The Prime Minister: We do not talk about the measures that are taken in relation to individuals. That is a matter for the police and for law enforcement generally, but I can assure the hon. Lady that it is being considered.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): I think I have just seen—I am looking at the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) as I say this—the most shameful moment in the House of Commons in my time to date. It is clear that our sovereign United Kingdom has come under attack from another state. Does the Prime Minister agree that the character of conflict is changing, that we must be relentless in trying to keep pace with it and that nothing will stop those who are doing this work receiving the resources they need?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the character of the threats we face is changing. They are diversifying and we need to ensure that we are able to deal with them across the range of actions that need to be taken. Indeed, some will not always fall into what might conventionally be considered to be defence.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Prime Minister confirm that we bear the Russian people nothing but good will? It is President Putin who we have in our sights and we will not allow him to use this in the presidential elections to burnish his image as a strong man.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It is the Russian state we are challenging in relation to this particular act that has taken place on UK soil, not the Russian people.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Is it not increasingly clear that we are engaged in hybrid warfare with Russia that includes disinformation, political interference, cyber-attacks and now very possibly this act of attempted murder? In considering how to respond, will my right hon. Friend also look at what additional help we might give to the people of Ukraine, who are the frontline in resisting Russian aggression and expansionism?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. He is absolutely right: we need to look across the diverse nature of the threat that we face and the actions that we are taking. We have already been taking a number of actions in support of Ukraine. That is also an important part of our deliberations and of our response.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): The Schleswig-Holstein question was understood by only three people. Everybody understands what is happening here today and there can be no criticism of the tone that the Prime Minister has adopted. She will know that, under article 4 of NATO, she can raise this as a concern with our NATO allies. Does she intend to do so?

The Prime Minister: As I have said in response to a number of other questions, we will be raising this with allies in a number of forms. As I said earlier, we will consider the response from the Russian state on Wednesday, and I will return at the earliest possible opportunity to the House to set out further measures.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me in commending Wiltshire's police and health services, who have done a superb job in responding to this difficult case, and in highlighting the level of dedication and public service that is evident not just in Wiltshire, but up and down the country in our emergency services?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in commending the valuable work that has been done by emergency services in Wiltshire. They are a fine example of the dedication and commitment of our public services and emergency services across the whole country.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I have absolutely no doubt that the only way to deal with Putin's regime in Russia is robustly, decisively and together as a Parliament and a country. I also add my voice to those talking about the repression of the Russian people, not least in Chechnya, where Putin continues to back the brutal regime of Ramzan Kadyrov and his attacks on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community. May I urge the Prime Minister to speak with the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to look at reviewing Russia Today's broadcasting licence and to speak to the House authorities about blocking its broadcasts in this building? Why should we be watching its propaganda in this Parliament?

The Prime Minister: As I said in response to a number of questions, we will look at the response from the Russian state but I will come back to the House at the earliest opportunity to look at the range of measures that could be necessary. In relation to the House authorities, as the hon. Gentleman will be aware, that would be a matter not for me, but for the House authorities.

Mr Speaker: I think that we have heard the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) loudly and clearly.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on her powerful statement and on her leadership in this incredibly grave matter. Is Russia a fit and proper state to be hosting or engaging in international sporting fixtures in 2018?

The Prime Minister: As I said in response in Prime Minister's questions last week, we will be considering the attendance at the particular event that is coming up in Russia—the World cup—of dignitaries and Ministers from the United Kingdom.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I say to the Prime Minister that there should be unity across the House on what I feel is the proportionate and sensible approach that she has taken to analysing what has been happening and to coming back to report to the House. I also say that there are certain circumstances, as

she knows, where we take party political differences of opinion, but when our country is potentially under attack, that is just not appropriate.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the tone that he has adopted. He is absolutely right: this is a question of the national interest. It is a question of the interest of our country and what another state may have done on British soil to people living here in the United Kingdom. That matter should concern all of us and be above party politics.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I know, having served with my right hon. Friend in the Home Office, that she will do what is right to keep our country safe. Will she confirm that, if Her Majesty's Government conclude that there was unlawful use of force by the Russian state, we possess a considerable range of offensive cyber-capabilities that we will not hesitate to deploy against that state, if it is necessary to keep our country safe?

The Prime Minister: We, of course, will look at responses across a number of areas of activity, should it be—as my right hon. Friend said and as I said in my statement—that we conclude that this action does amount to an unlawful use of force by the Russian state here in the UK.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): It is good that the Prime Minister has come here today to spell out what actions have already been taken and has promised to return again to inform us of what happens next. Will she also make sure that the lessons learned in the Salisbury community about this threat and how to prevent it in local communities is shared in an appropriate way with other communities across the country?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to say that I am sure lessons will be coming out of this for local communities, the NHS and the police as they look into this matter. We will ensure that those are available to all across the country.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): In considering Russia, we should never forget that, for all its geographical size, Russia's economy is little more than half that of the UK. In those circumstances, does my right hon. Friend agree that British economic levers are far more potent than some might realise and that we should not hesitate, if the circumstances demand it, to pull them hard?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, we will be looking at the full range of measures once we have considered the response that comes from the Russian state. The United Kingdom has in fact been one of the leaders in ensuring that, within the European Union, sanctions against Russia are in place as a result of the action that they took in Crimea and Ukraine.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): This horrific attempted murder on British soil demands a strong and united response from this House. Can the Prime Minister confirm whether the nerve agent in question is banned under the chemical weapons convention and that Russia is a signatory to that convention?

The Prime Minister: Yes, it is illegal to use a nerve agent of this sort. I understand that it is one that is banned under the convention.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Would the Prime Minister agree that this attack probably involved a professional, Russian-trained operative in order for such an individually targeted assault to be carried out with what must have been a minute amount of something like sarin, VX, or tabun, which could so easily have had catastrophic, wide-scale, indiscriminate and deadly consequences?

The Prime Minister: I will not speculate about the nature of the individual or individuals who are responsible for this attack. That is of course a matter for the police investigation.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Now we have all agreed that Russia is a clear and present danger, will the Prime Minister agree that we have to be fully organised to meet that danger? If we walk out into London tonight, we see Russian mafia and Russian security people swaggering about our capital city—all over Europe we see them. What they do not like is sanctions that bite. Will she come back to this House on an early occasion with a firm list of new sanctions that we can take against Russia?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is asking me to refer to a particular measure. As I said in my statement and in answer to a number of questions, we will consider the response from the Russian state. Should there be no credible response, we will determine and conclude that the action amounts to unlawful use of force by the Russian state in the United Kingdom, and I will return with further measures.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Would my right hon. Friend confirm that, despite the difficulties that the American presidency may have on these issues, we are fully engaged with the American Government and our allies on this very important matter?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give my right hon. Friend the confirmation that we have engaged with our allies and will continue to engage with them on this important issue.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for coming to the House with this very important, but sadly not surprising conclusion today. She is going to make a further statement on Wednesday, but can I ask her to say a bit more about the possible responses and to ensure, at a time when voices and forces are trying to erode confidence in open democratic societies, that those responses will place us firmly and foursquare behind the solidarity and security of the west?

The Prime Minister: I hope the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not set out today what the response will be. We obviously need to consider the response from the Russian state and then put together the appropriate further measures to ensure the robust response that I and other Members have called for. He can rest assured, however, as can other Members, that we see a Russia that is flouting the international rules-based order—we have been very clear about that—that we will

[*The Prime Minister*]

stand up for democracy, the rule of law and the international rules-based order and the values that underpin it, and that we remain committed to the security and defence of Europe and to defending the values that underpin the west.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I understand that the nerve agent Novichok was developed by Russia specifically to avoid being covered by the chemical weapons treaty and to avoid detection by standard equipment. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that Novichok is a totally illegal substance under a treaty to which Russia is a signatory and that any knowledge of detection and treatment that we gain from this ghastly attack will be shared with authorities, including health authorities, in this country and with our allies abroad?

The Prime Minister: It is very clear that the use of such a nerve agent goes against the spirit of the chemical weapons treaty. As my hon. Friend would expect, we will be talking to the responsible chemical weapons body and raising this issue.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): In the light of her comments, which I commend, does the Prime Minister agree that there is no place for hon. Members on either side of the House appearing on Russia Today? It is a propaganda mouthpiece for the Russian state with which no democratic politician should engage, and they should think twice before doing so. We should not be engaging with and giving credibility to such a media outlet.

The Prime Minister: We should all be wary and careful in looking at media outlets that any Member chooses to appear on. As I said, the issue of Russia Today is of concern to Members across the House, and I will make a further statement in the House after we have had the Russian state response.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): In the early 1980s, the planning assumption was that the road to war with the Soviet Union would be preceded by six months of increasing tension, sabotage and assassination. What are the current assumptions?

The Prime Minister: There was a time when the threats posed by Russia and others were clear and limited in their type; today, we see a diversity of threats. The previous question referenced Russia's use of propaganda, and we see it using a variety of means by which to attempt to interfere, intervene and affect countries in the west. We must be able to respond across the range of threats posed.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I thank the Prime Minister for her remarks about this growing crisis. I appreciate that she will not want to discuss individual circumstances, but can she reassure the House that not only former Russian and eastern European nationals who might have offended Mr Putin, but high-profile British figures and, indeed, British public buildings are being reviewed to determine their security status in the light of the recent situation?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, we do not comment on individual cases—the hon. Lady is absolutely right about that. On national security, we regularly monitor and update the actions taken to protect people and premises here in the UK based on the threat as we perceive it at the time.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): As someone who has campaigned for a Magnitsky law and who was a member of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Public Bill Committee, may I say that the Opposition amendments, though well intentioned, were flawed and can be improved on? I am extremely grateful for the co-operation of Ministers and hope that the discussions will be fruitful. Will my right hon. Friend reflect the need for our allies abroad to understand that this could easily have happened in a provincial town in France, Germany or any other country, and that we are looking for action as well as warm words of support?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, a supporter of the Magnitsky law, for highlighting the point I was trying to make earlier, which is that if amendments are to be added to legislation, we need to ensure they are workable. We need to get the amendments right. On his point about our allies, he is absolutely right: we should point out to people that this could have happened anywhere, in any provincial town or city like Salisbury.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The level of resilience voiced by the Prime Minister today has been many years in coming, but it is hugely welcome—indeed, it would put our national security at significant risk if we were led by anyone who did not understand the gravity of the threat that Russia poses to this nation. She mentioned our NATO allies and that she will come forward with measures on Wednesday. Will she confirm that our NATO allies and the potential for a collective response is in her thinking?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He is absolutely right: it is imperative that in this country we recognise the nature of the threat and actions Russia has taken through a wide range of means. I am also clear that, as we consider what further actions need to be taken, we must ensure they are robust, clearly defend our values here in the UK and send a clear message to those who would seek to undermine them.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on her robust stance against Russian aggression. She will be aware that the most effective sanctions are those taken multilaterally. The concern of some is that when we leave the EU, we will lose our seat at the table on the body that sets those sanctions. Will she therefore reassure us that a lot of effort will go into building up a new relationship to ensure continuity in our approach towards Russia?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) raised this issue of collective action. Obviously, as my hon. Friend says, the position in relation to the UK Government's actions on sanctions will change when we leave the EU, and we are putting in place measures to ensure that the UK can act independently,

but I also made it clear in my Mansion House speech that we would want to work with our allies on such issues. As he and the hon. Gentleman have said, sanctions are more effective when undertaken collectively.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I commend the Prime Minister for the stance she has adopted today. When she returns to the House, will she take the opportunity to assuage the cross-party concerns on the Select Committee on Defence about the de-escalation of our presence in the high north, the reduction in maritime surveillance and patrols, and the cancellation of this year's cold weather training? There is a need for investment in defence, and I hope she will take this opportunity to deliver it.

The Prime Minister: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we consider very carefully the actions we take, including the training exercises that our military forces undertake. As I indicated in my statement, I am pleased that our forces are leading part of NATO's enhanced forward presence in Estonia. I visited those forces in Estonia last autumn, and I can say that it is not only valuable for our forces but hugely welcomed by the people of Estonia, who obviously are right against the border with Russia and feel the threat very particularly.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement, and I pay tribute to a group of individuals who have, I think, been unmentioned so far this afternoon: the armed forces personnel who attended with the professionalism and selfless devotion to duty that we expect of them.

What is the Prime Minister doing with our allies in NATO, the United Nations and, of course, the European Union to ensure the maintenance of the international rules-based system, which is under systemic threat from the Russian Federation?

The Prime Minister: I reiterate my hon. Friend's comments about the armed forces. In fact, I did mention them in my statement, but let me again praise the work that they did, alongside our emergency services, in relation to this incident, as well as what they do for us day in, day out. I assure my hon. Friend that we will look very carefully at any further measures that we should be taking in response to the incident.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The Prime Minister should know that if by Wednesday she concludes that we are indeed embattled, she will find both unity and resolve across the House as we face down a common threat.

Twelve years ago, in the aftermath of a wave of al-Qaeda-inspired attacks, we transformed the capacity of Governments to co-ordinate and fight back against extremism. May I urge the Prime Minister, in respect of the measures that she will introduce on Wednesday, to think radically about how she will create Government capacity to co-ordinate our response to this new level of threat, including new safeguards against the abuse of social media, which we know is part of the Russians' active measures playbook?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks, and for the tone in which he made them. He is right: after the attacks by al-Qaeda, it was very clear that the then Government were putting in

place a whole new structure of response in terms of counter-terrorism. UK Governments have been consistently looking at hostile state activity for many years, but in our national security capability review, as we look at our ability to react to the threats that we now face, we will of course ensure that the structures within Government are such that it is possible to co-ordinate properly the actions that we need to take.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): I welcome the statesmanlike tone of the Prime Minister's comments. They were in stark contrast to those of the Leader of the Opposition, whose Soviet ramblings would have done no benefit to Russia Today. May I urge her to be uncompromising in signalling that British and European liberal democratic values are not negotiable, and that this Government will not allow this country to be a playground for Kremlin kleptocrats? Will she consider aggressive cultural sanctions to hit Mr Putin and his team where it hurts, and, in particular, will she consider boycotting sporting events?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for what he has said. I assure him that, as I have said to others, we will consider a range of activities—a range of responses—and I will update the House further at the earliest opportunity. Let me also confirm that we will continue to defend the democratic values that underpin us as a country, but wish to do so alongside our allies. It was remarked earlier that the international rules-based order is under threat from Russia. I have to say that it is also under threat from others, and it is important that we stand up and robustly defend it.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Three people are gravely ill in hospital following this horrific chain of events. I welcome the Prime Minister's resolve that business cannot go on as usual. Will she take this opportunity to tighten up the loopholes in the system in respect of money laundering, so that the "From Russia With Cash" situation that has occurred all too often does not turn into "From Russia With Blood"?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady will know, the Government recently took extra powers to enable us to deal with criminal finances through the Criminal Finances Act 2017, and I think it important that we did that. We are well aware that the very attractiveness of normal financial activity here in London can mean that there are those who see an opportunity for illicit flows of money, and we will take every possible action against them.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the strength of the Prime Minister's statement. I am sure that she, like me, will be concerned by the parallels with a previous time when autocratic leaders decided to challenge the international rules-based system to prove that might would be right. Can she reassure me that she will work with allies to make it very clear to Mr Putin that, like them, he could easily go down the path to disaster and defeat?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly be working with allies to make very clear our defence of the international rules-based order, and that those who attack it will not win.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Today the focus has inevitably been on the Russians who are crooks and cronies of Putin. There are many decent Russians who have bravely spoken out against the regime, but those whom I have met over the years, both here and in Russia, sometimes feel very alone. Can we do more than just send a signal that we are absolutely appalled by what Putin has done? We need to send a signal of solidarity with those who are trying to resist his regime.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady speaks well about this matter. There are those who have bravely spoken out. We should be very clear that we support them in doing so. We want to ensure that they are able and free to do so, and able to feel confident about doing so, without fearing action that might be taken against them as a result.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I, too, commend my right hon. Friend for the statesmanlike way in which she is handling this appalling case. If it is indeed proved that it was state-sponsored, will she ensure that the response is not just from the United Kingdom, but from NATO and all our European allies? Together we stand, and divided we provide an opening for this man.

The Prime Minister: We have already been talking to allies about the nature of the act that has taken place, and we will continue to do so. We will encourage our allies to recognise the despicable nature of what has happened in the United Kingdom.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The main security challenges are state-sponsored terrorism, Daesh-sponsored terrorism and threats to cyber-security. Should not the UK defence portfolio be redesigned to meet those challenges, rather than concentrating on a new generation of nuclear weapons?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman refers to a number of threats. We ensure that we have the capabilities to address the terrorist threat and the threat of hostile state activity through a variety of actions that the Government take. As I said earlier, not every response sits within what would conventionally be called defence. The work of the security and intelligence agencies and the work of the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism, which sits in the Home Office, are also involved. That is why our national security capability review is important in bringing together all parts of our response and ensuring that we have the capabilities we need.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The Prime Minister is clearly right to suggest that, from hacking infrastructure to spreading disinformation, Russia has been waging a cyber-war against the west for a number of years. As Home Secretary, she took the Bill that became the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 through the House with cross-party support. Can she now reassure the House that if more such powers are needed, she will not hesitate to ask for them?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to confirm that. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is already considering what further counter-terrorism powers may be needed.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): Since my election I have spent a great deal of time campaigning for more protections for emergency services workers, and it is particularly disappointing that we are now having to reflect on how we can keep them safe from nerve agents. I welcome the Prime Minister's statement, which made it clear that what was particularly reckless about this attack was the decision to use a nerve agent that would inevitably put at risk members of the public, as well as our emergency services and NHS workers who would have to respond. I welcome the news that she will put that at the forefront of the meeting that she is due to have this week, and will put the seriousness of the risk presented to police and NHS workers in particular at the forefront of the robust measures that are now needed.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady has raised a very important point about our emergency services. We have already, in recent years, had a further look at the framework within which they operate and the sort of incidents to which they might need to respond, but we will of course continue to keep this under review.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): The attacks on Mr Litvinenko and Colonel Skripal had one thing in common: they were designed not just to kill, but to kill in a particularly terrifying and horrible way. With that dreadful threat in mind, will the Prime Minister ensure that our national defence is in sufficient shape to meet that Russian threat in terms of composition, location and funding?

The Prime Minister: Yes. As I have said in response to a number of questions, this is a matter of the capabilities that we have across our national security and defence. It is important that we have been conducting, and are continuing to conduct, a number of reviews that go straight to the heart of this matter, to ensure that we have the capabilities that we need across the board.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I commend the Prime Minister for their statement and the robustness with which they addressed the House. Will they assure the House that in the coming days, when they discuss next actions with our allies, they will act robustly with some of our more recalcitrant NATO allies—notably Spain—who give port to the Russian fleet to allow them to refuel? Enough is enough.

The Prime Minister: As I have said, I will of course be raising this issue with allies, and we will be talking with them about the nature of the response that we feel is appropriate to such an action having taken place.

Northern Ireland Finances

6.20 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on Northern Ireland finances.

Last week, I made a written statement in which I explained that the pressures on public services meant that it was imperative for the Government to take steps to provide clarity to enable planning in Northern Ireland for 2018-19. With great reluctance and in spite of my strong preference for a new Executive to set a budget, I set out in that statement the resource and capital allocations that I considered to be the most balanced and appropriate settlement for Northern Ireland Departments. I did this following intensive engagement with the Northern Ireland civil service and consultation with all the main Northern Ireland parties. In the continued absence of an Executive, I have an obligation to take these and any other measures that are necessary to keep Northern Ireland functioning, but I will only take such measures where they are essential, limited in nature and part of a clear and consistent approach by the Government.

This approach is based on a number of principles. First, we remain steadfast in our commitment to the Belfast agreement; all that we do will be with the purpose of protecting and fulfilling the agreement. But, secondly, we will take those decisions that are necessary to provide good governance and political stability for Northern Ireland, consistent always with restoring the Executive and local decision making at the earliest possible opportunity. Thirdly, we will continue to implement our obligations under the agreement and its successors where possible, always working for the good of the community as a whole. Finally, we will continue to work with all the Northern Ireland parties—and with the Irish Government as appropriate—to remove the barriers to restoring the Executive and a fully functioning Assembly.

The principles at the core of the agreement, and the political institutions that it establishes, continue to have our full and unreserved support. We will uphold the principle of consent, consistent with this Government's support for Northern Ireland's place within the Union and while maintaining the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom. We believe in devolution and the imperative for local decision making by local politicians. We support power sharing on a cross-community basis, based on mutual respect and recognition. We will continue to support and facilitate north-south co-operation, including as we leave the EU, while always preserving the economic integrity of the United Kingdom. We will continue to work closely with the Irish Government in full accordance with the three-stranded approach. And we will continue to act fairly and govern in the interests of all parts of the community in Northern Ireland.

The necessary steps that I have taken and will continue to take are consistent with all these commitments. In addition to the steps I set out last week, there are several associated measures required to further secure public finances, which I will be taking forward. As well as cutting costs, securing efficiencies and beginning to take the steps to transform public services, it is right to look at how income can be increased to protect the public services on which the people of Northern Ireland depend. So I will introduce legislation to set a regional rate, which will increase domestic rates by 3% above inflation.

This will make an important contribution to sustainable finances in the long run, with the additional funding addressing urgent pressures in health and education.

I intend to act to extend the cost-capping of the current renewable heat incentive scheme in Northern Ireland, which the Assembly had put in place over a year ago. It would not be acceptable to put finances at risk by simply allowing that cap to lapse. I therefore propose to extend it for a further year from 1 April, the minimal possible step to protect the public purse. I will also confirm the final spending totals for the Northern Ireland Departments for the 2017-18 financial year in legislation, to set supplementary estimates.

I believe that the time is right to address the ongoing public concern about MLA pay in the absence of a functioning Assembly. I thank Trevor Reaney, who was instructed by my predecessor to produce an independent view and recommended a 27.5% reduction to MLA pay. I will seek to introduce legislation to take a power to vary MLA pay. Further to that, I am minded to reduce pay in line with the Reaney review recommendation, but I would welcome full and final representations from the Northern Ireland parties before I make a final decision.

These measures—which I take reluctantly, but which are necessary in the absence of a functioning Executive and Assembly—will deliver the stability and the decisions to enable forward planning for the financial year ahead. But I am clear that they cannot provide the local input and fundamental decisions that are needed to secure a more sustainable future for Northern Ireland. My powers as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland are limited. The scope of this House to pass legislation on the devolved issues that matter for Northern Ireland is limited. This rightly reflects the devolution settlement that is in place and to which this Government are committed. But in the continuing absence of an Executive, there are fundamental decisions in Northern Ireland that cannot be taken, scrutinised and implemented as they should be.

That has been the situation for 14 months already, and in the continued absence of an Executive, it would be irresponsible for us not to consider how we might provide for different arrangements until such time as the devolved institutions are back up and running. Alongside this, I continue to keep under review my statutory obligation to call an Assembly election. I would welcome the views and proposals of the Northern Ireland parties and others on how such arrangements—providing for local decision making and scrutiny on a cross-community basis—might be achieved in the continued absence of an Executive and how any such arrangements might work alongside the other institutions of the agreement.

Let me be clear that this in no way affects my commitment to the Belfast agreement, or my commitment to work to remove the barriers to the restoration of devolution. As the 20th anniversary of the Belfast agreement approaches, I am clearer than ever that Northern Ireland needs strong political leadership from a locally elected and accountable devolved Government, and that remains my firm goal. I commend this statement to the House.

6.27 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): May I begin by wishing the Secretary of State a very happy birthday for today? I thank her for advance sight of her statement. Of course, we saw most of it last week when the

[Owen Smith]

Government effectively published the budget for Northern Ireland in a written statement that came out at 5 o'clock on a Thursday evening, and I have to say that I think that is an unsatisfactory state of affairs; it is a bit discourteous to this House and, more importantly, the people of Northern Ireland to announce what is a £10.5 billion budget affecting key services for 1.8 million citizens in such a manner, with no opportunity for this House to question, challenge or, certainly, to amend those allocations, and in the absence of any accountable devolved Government in Northern Ireland. I am sure the Secretary of State would not think that was a suitable way to set a budget for her constituents in Staffordshire or mine in Pontypridd, and I hope she will explain to the House why the Government felt they needed to do it in that fashion.

Dare I suggest, Mr Speaker, that the real reason for this slightly stealthy announcement is that the Government are a bit embarrassed that just days before the Conservative party is going to vote through the latest rounds of cuts for public services affecting citizens in England, Wales and Scotland, the £1 billion partnership with the Democratic Unionist party means that Northern Ireland alone is being spared? We absolutely welcome that investment in Northern Ireland, but we also need to see investment in health and education and other key public services in every part of the UK, not just the bit where the Tories need DUP votes.

Turning to the substance of the budget, the Secretary of State said last week and repeated a moment ago that, in the absence of an Assembly and with decisions being taken by wholly unaccountable permanent secretaries, some fundamental decisions cannot be addressed. We agree, but it seems to me that some pretty fundamental decisions were taken last week by the Secretary of State, and I wonder whether she might answer some questions about them today.

First, on the decision to put up taxes in Northern Ireland through the regional rate, can the Secretary of State confirm whether that was discussed in detail and agreed with any or all of the parties in Northern Ireland? Secondly, in respect of the decision to significantly increase the budgets for some individual Departments, can she explain to the House the reasons for an increase for the Department of Justice of £36 million, or 70%, on last year, an increase for the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs of £40 million, or 110%, on last year's budget, or the increase for the Department for Communities of £38 million, or 30%, on last year? I am sure that there are good reasons for all those increases and for the significant cuts that are made to some of the administrative Departments elsewhere, but the House and the people of Northern Ireland deserve some explanation why the decisions were made and by whom.

As I said, I welcome the extra resources for Northern Ireland, including the extra £80 million for health and education and the extra £100 million to transform the health service in line with the Bengoa report, but will the Secretary of State spell out how that £80 million on health and education will be divided? Who will make the decision about the appropriate allocation? Is that something that the DUP co-ordination committee will be discussing with the Conservative Government, or has it already been discussed?

The Secretary of State talks about big health reforms, and she will be aware that some of the reforms mentioned in Bengoa and other health plans related to hospital closures and other changes to the configuration of health services. Does she imagine that such big decisions could be taken by civil servants? If not, what exactly is the £100 million to be spent on?

The gravity of the issues at hand and the scale of the decisions being taken merely serve to underline the grave crisis that we face in Northern Ireland 14 months after the Executive collapsed and power sharing ended. I welcome the Secretary of State reiterating her commitment to the Belfast agreement and the principles of consent and power sharing that underpin it, especially in the light of recent attempts by some to undermine the agreement. However, we need more than more tireless activity; we need to see some success in the forthcoming negotiations if we are to get to next month's 20th anniversary with a real sense of optimism about the future of the agreement and of power sharing.

The Secretary of State was at pains to point out that she does not anticipate any failure in the negotiations, but the House and the country will have been struck by the acknowledgement that she thinks that she may need to consider alternative means of keeping the agreement and political accountability alive in the absence of an Executive. That raises important questions about feasibility, given that some parties will not want to take part in a shadow or other form of Assembly, and about the form of any alternative. It also raises a significant risk, of which I hope she will take particular note. Moving to an alternative form of Assembly would take pressure off the parties to come to an agreement that allows them to re-engage in meaningful power sharing. Does she acknowledge that risk in any shift away from the agreement?

Finally, I urge the Secretary of State to ensure that this is the last time we push through a budget using this unsatisfactory process and the last time that a budget is set by this House and not Stormont, where it ought to be set.

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words about my birthday. I was not expecting to spend it making a budget statement, but there we go. I join him by saying that I hope that this is the last time that I have to stand at the Dispatch Box having taken such action, because we all agree that such decisions should be taken by locally elected politicians. The people who elected their politicians in Northern Ireland want them to take such decisions. I genuinely believe that those politicians want to take those decisions. There are, as he knows and as we have discussed previously, some issues on which the parties cannot agree, but I believe that we can get to a point at which a devolved Government can get up and running. That is what I am determined to achieve. Everything that I have done and set out today is in line with that aim. I want to see a devolved Government back in Stormont. The decisions that have been taken, while difficult, are those that needed to be taken for the public services, but I have taken them in the light of the fact that I do not want to undermine the constitutional arrangements and devolution settlement in Northern Ireland.

As for timing, the hon. Gentleman will recall that I committed to lay a budget by last week when I appeared in front of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee the week before last. That is why it was important to get the

written statement out last week, and I am here at the earliest opportunity to explain things to the House and to take questions from right hon. and hon. Members. However, it is important to put it on the record that I did not publish the statement until I had had the chance to show it to all the main parties represented at Stormont and until they had had the opportunity to see the allocations. My fervent hope is that they will actually deliver the budget, which is why it is important that they were all consulted on the work that had been done.

I pay tribute to my officials and the civil servants of the Northern Ireland civil service. They have worked incredibly hard and selflessly to help to deliver the budget in a way that is uncomfortable for many. They want political direction from politicians, and it is difficult for them to do without it. They have gone above and beyond anything that we would expect of civil servants.

As for the decisions on the allocations, I looked at the key Departments. The hon. Gentleman asks about Justice, and I wanted to ensure that there was money to protect the policing budget, which he will recognise is very important. He asked about the £100 million from the confidence and supply arrangement for health transformation. That was money that the Government recognised and agreed needed to be spent in Northern Ireland because of its unique circumstances. I actually visited the hospital in Derry/Londonderry only last Monday and met consultants and managers, and it was clear to me that health transformation is a priority and that we need to ensure that the money is spent. I have taken legal advice to ensure that the money goes towards the priorities on which it is designed to be spent.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the alternative approaches, and he will know that many have suggested ways to arrange some form of functioning Assembly or scrutiny at Stormont. I am considering all the suggestions, a number of which have been made by the parties, and I would welcome further suggestions. I am taking legal advice on them all, because I do not want to do anything that undermines what we have achieved in the 20 years since the Belfast agreement. However, if there is a way of getting ourselves back on the road to a functioning devolved Government in Stormont, with scrutiny being applied by locally elected politicians, we should endeavour to try to find that route.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is the second of four ministerial statements to the House today. Notwithstanding its immense importance, and in the interests of accommodating subsequent business, I appeal to colleagues not to preface their questions with mini-speeches, but simply to ask a pithy question.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Nevertheless, Mr Speaker, I hope that you will allow me to add my best wishes to the Secretary of State on her birthday. I welcome the statement, particularly the bit in which she invites comments about how we might close the democratic deficit in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has many helpful suggestions, and we will certainly be sending them to her.

I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the written ministerial statement made on Thursday and the bit in which she says:

"Permanent Secretaries cannot... take the full range of decisions that would be available to Ministers"—[*Official Report*, 8 March 2018; Vol. 637, c. 20WS.],

which is, of course, perfectly correct. She goes on to say that Ministers will be helpful in offering guidance. May I press her on exactly what form that guidance will take? She has set out departmental expenditure limits, but there is little granularity—certainly in the public domain—about what actually constitutes those DELs.

Karen Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, for his good wishes, for his question and for the Committee's work in looking at devolution in Northern Ireland. I was pleased to give evidence to the inquiry, and I know that the Committee has visited several institutions and other places in Northern Ireland to consider what might be done. I look forward to the Committee's recommendations.

In the absence of ministerial direction from Stormont, my hon. Friend is right that there is concern about the work that civil servants can do. We have worked closely with them, ensuring that legal advice is received at all points, so that they have the support they need to take decisions based on those that were previously taken by the Executive or that the Executive had indicated would have been taken. I have written to the permanent secretaries to set out my view and to provide guidance on how any money, such as the health transformation money, should be spent in line with the Bengoa recommendations.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for early sight of her statement, and I join the House in wishing her a very happy birthday. I will begin by making absolutely clear my view that while money needs to be allocated for the continued funding of public services in Northern Ireland, those matters should more properly be addressed by locally elected representatives. The decision to increase rates, for example, is a policy decision that reverses a key Stormont policy.

I am sure that none of us wants to be here again, but here we are, in order that the behind-the-scenes machinery of government that keeps the lights on and keeps people's wages being paid can continue. We must at all times, however, keep in mind the fact that the restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland is the principal aim. I was pleased that the Secretary of State continued to welcome the views and proposals of the Northern Irish parties and others on how local decision making and scrutiny on a cross-community basis might be achieved. Would she tell us a little bit more about how those views and proposals might be canvassed more transparently and shared with Northern Irish citizens?

With regard to confidence and supply agreement moneys, while of course no one ever begrudges extra money spent on health or education, the sum of more than £400 million is part of the £1 billion that the Democratic Unionist party extracted from the Conservatives to prop up the Government. In view of the considerable concerns about the deal and, indeed, recent concerns about the transparency of the political donations process in Northern Ireland, when can we expect further details about what the extra money will be spent on? Will the Secretary of State explain the destination of the money before the House separately from the allocation of funds required to continue funding public services? It is

[Deidre Brock]

worrying that we appear to be stepping into a zone where money is allocated without close ministerial direction, and we have not yet seen any criteria for how that money will be spent. Will the Secretary of State commit to providing much greater transparency on the spending of the DUP deal money and lay the full details before the House?

Karen Bradley: Again, I thank the hon. Lady—I feel that I may be thanking everyone for their good wishes—for her kindness. She asked about alternative approaches. I invite any parties with suggestions about how this could function and how we might have some form of Assembly functioning with scrutiny in Stormont, but I will have to take legal advice on everything that is proposed. If a suggestion gathers cross-party support, we would want to talk about that with others so we ensured that we could deliver something that everyone was confident would put us back on the route to devolution, not away from it. That is my key priority.

The hon. Lady also asked about the money for the confidence and supply arrangement. She will know that the agreement is on the internet, and is available for everyone to see and download. She should also recognise that these are important changes, particularly to infrastructure. The York Street interchange, for example, is something that anyone in Belfast will know is crying out for investment and change. That is why the Government want to make sure that money is spent on the things on which it needs to be spent, including health transformation, in line with the Bengoa recommendations.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend think that the allocations in the budget largely suggested by the Northern Irish civil service, which is pretty canny, would be very different if the same civil service was advising a Northern Irish Executive, which is obviously not working at the moment?

Karen Bradley: Clearly, my hon. and gallant Friend is right that those are conversations that the Northern Ireland civil service has had with the parties as well as with the UK Government. It has been incredibly professional in ensuring that it looks at both the decisions made by the Executive before they collapsed and their programme for government. It reflects the priorities of the UK Government in ensuring that health, education and policing are protected.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): May I join hon. Members in wishing the Secretary of State every best wish on this momentous occasion? May I thank her for early sight of the statement and for the Government's clear support in that statement once again for Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom? That is very welcome.

I welcome the budget statement and the £410 million extra for Northern Ireland as a result of the confidence and supply agreement. It will be spent on infrastructure, health and education, and will go to deprived communities, to mental health, to east and west, urban and rural, nationalist and Unionist—everyone benefits. That is a good news story for Northern Ireland, and it has been welcomed across Northern Ireland.

May I also welcome the fact that the Secretary of State said in the statement that she would take a series of decisions—the Government were beginning to take those decisions—for the good government of Northern Ireland? That is long overdue, and I welcome the series of measures that she has announced. I warmly welcome her willingness to look at arrangements that provide for local decision making and scrutiny on a cross-community basis in the meantime. She can be assured of our full support and engagement in that process. We want devolution up and running—she knows that we would form the Executive tomorrow on the basis of the agreed programme for government with Sinn Féin, and we welcome all efforts to return proper decision making to Northern Ireland.

Karen Bradley: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his good wishes and for his comments. I thank the DUP for the role that it played, along with all the other parties, in working with the Government to deliver the budget and ensure that we were able to reflect the priorities of the parties of Northern Ireland.

The right hon. Gentleman is right that the confidence and supply arrangement money that we have released will absolutely be spent on a cross-community basis, for all communities, and for all parts of Northern Ireland, dealing with issues that have perhaps been underfunded in the past or, particularly in the case of infrastructure arrangements, very much need funding today. I thank him for his kind words.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I welcome the review by the Secretary of State of pay for Members of the Legislative Assembly. On a separate matter, does she think it is unsustainable for hon. Members who do not take their seats in Parliament to continue to receive representative money for political campaigning?

Karen Bradley: Clearly, the matter to which my hon. Friend refers is a matter for the House, and I know that there are hon. Members who are well versed in the procedures needed for such matters. The issue of MLA pay is something I need to look at as a result of the review by Trevor Reaney, and I would welcome representations from all about that matter.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May I, too, thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement? The measures that she has brought to the House are to be supported. It is sad but inevitable that it should have to happen this way, but all that we are doing is treating the symptoms, not the underlying disease.

The Secretary of State will have seen the recent comments of the chairperson of the Policing Board about the need for proper accountability of policing in Northern Ireland. The fact that the Police Service of Northern Ireland spends £125,000 a day on overtime demonstrates that the chairperson of the Policing Board is right, and is that not something else that needs to be tackled?

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman makes a point that demonstrates once again why we need devolved government in Stormont. I have met the chair of the Policing Board, and I have also spoken to the Chief Constable about this matter. They are both keen that political representation on the Policing Board should be

restored as soon as possible so that there is proper governance. I will be in Washington at the end of the week for the St Patrick's day events there, and I believe that the chair of the Policing Board will be there too, and I hope to catch up with her and discuss how we might make that a reality.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): My constituents in Kettering were under the clear impression that the main purpose in life of Sinn Féin was to avoid at all costs direct rule from Westminster. Is it not clear but ironic that by refusing to reach an agreement with the DUP Sinn Féin has brought about exactly the thing that it has always campaigned to avoid?

Karen Bradley: I do not want to get into the whys and wherefores of what happened in the talks process. All I know is that all parties have given me a very strong commitment that they want to go back into devolved government, and I am seeking to find ways to make that a reality.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I listened carefully to the Secretary of State's statement and noted that she was decisive in announcing an increase in rates in Northern Ireland. I was extremely disappointed, to put it mildly, that she continues to dither about cutting the salaries of MLAs. Does she not recognise and accept that it is morally indefensible that MLAs should continue to receive their full salary in the absence of a functioning Assembly for 14 months?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady sums up the comments that have been made to me by members of the public across Northern Ireland, but I do want to make sure that everybody has the chance to make representations on this matter, so that the power we can legislate for in Westminster is used appropriately. I also want to say, as I have said to her at the Select Committee, that, although there are good grounds to look at the pay of MLAs, I do not think the pay for staff should be affected. I think we would all agree that our staff do fantastic work and they need to be properly remunerated for the great work they do for the constituents of the MLAs.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I welcome the statement, but does my right hon. Friend agree that the fact that this year, unlike with the previous budget, she has had to take some decisions that could not have been thought through by the Executive before they fell means that today we are several steps further towards direct rule than we were a couple of weeks ago?

Karen Bradley: I do not agree with my hon. Friend. A budget needed to be balanced. These steps were taken to balance it. I have done so while being consistently mindful of the need to make sure we maintain the position of restoring devolved government wherever possible.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): In welcoming the statement, I concur with others in wishing the Secretary of State a happy birthday. Going out to consultation on the MLA salary issue and the office costs allowances is a good move. Does she agree that it would be intolerable to move on that if the House were not also to move on the issue of MPs from Sinn Féin? They deliberately boycott this House, whereas MLAs are prevented from doing their full job.

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. He will know that the matter he raises is one for the House, but the House will have heard the strong words from both sides on the matter.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): May I start by paying tribute to my right hon. Friend and her predecessor for their tireless work to try to restore devolved government to Northern Ireland? Will she reaffirm that her clear commitment to working for that restoration of devolved government goes hand in hand with her clear commitment to ensuring that, while that work goes on, through this budget the people of Northern Ireland continue to receive the services and investment they need?

Karen Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He seems to have a frog in his throat and he did well to deliver his question without starting to cough too much. I agree that it would just not be tolerable for the UK Government to not do what was necessary to enable public services to continue to be delivered. The people I have met in Northern Ireland have been very dedicated public servants and they do deserve that, so that they can continue to deliver the schools, hospitals and policing, and all other manner of public services, that the people of Northern Ireland need.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): The Secretary of State has said that some fundamental decisions cannot be taken in Northern Ireland at the moment. How long will she go on accepting that before she decides that we have to go further and appoint Ministers? Will she make a decision in the next month, please, on the Commonwealth youth games, which are to be held in Northern Ireland in 2021? If a decision is not taken by the end of this month, we will lose those games.

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady, who was a great sports Minister, knows exactly what the problem is, and I remember it from my previous brief. Belfast has been awarded the 2021 Commonwealth games but the absence of an Executive and Ministers to sign the appropriate documentation and contractual information means that there is great difficulty. I am looking at how we can resolve many of these issues, and that one is certainly on my table at the moment.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, particularly the long overdue announcement that some action will be taken on MLAs' pay. She said in her statement that she is looking for full and final representations from the Northern Irish parties. Will she also be seeking further representations from voluntary sector, third sector and community groups, many of which have had to fill the gap left by MLAs? Not only are they not carrying out parliamentary duties, but many of them have been completely absent in their constituencies.

Karen Bradley: I would welcome representations from all. Trevor Reaney's work and recommendations, for which I thank him, are very valuable and helpful, but it would also be helpful to hear the views of all parties and all sides on this matter.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): We welcome the fact that the Government have now announced a budget for Northern Ireland. Does the Secretary of State recognise that hundreds of decisions about how

[Sammy Wilson]

that money is spent require some input from a Minister? Will she give a commitment that those issues will be addressed by the promises she has made to the House today to look at further measures?

Karen Bradley: On the budget I have spoken about today, I am confident that the direction is there for civil servants to deliver as required and as wanted by all parties. The right hon. Gentleman is right that many decisions are awaited. It is frustrating for all of us, as it is for him, that in the absence of devolved administration in Northern Ireland some of those decisions have not yet been taken.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I agree with my right hon. Friend that it is deeply regrettable that she has had to take the actions set out today in regard to a budget for Northern Ireland, which are no substitute for local Ministers on the ground making decisions. Will she assure the House that she will do everything to prevent any return to direct rule?

Karen Bradley: My priority is to restore devolved government in Northern Ireland. For the good of the Union and for the good of the people of Northern Ireland, that is the right thing to do. It is also worth putting on the record that that is the primary aim of the Irish Government as well. I want to put on the record my thanks for their support in the talks process, and I know that they are committed to restoring devolved government, as we are.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Could the Minister set a timetable for her consideration of a halfway house on some of the scrutiny issues that have been mentioned by Members across the House? She would have support on allowing MLAs to table questions, to meet as committees and to scrutinise decisions. As a direct rule Minister, I know there were hundreds and hundreds of decisions taken every day by Ministers that are now not being taken. There needs to be scrutiny of those taking those decisions.

Karen Bradley: I know the right hon. Gentleman served as a direct rule Minister, in 2004-05 or around then. He was distinguished in doing so—

Owen Smith: It was 2005-06.

Karen Bradley: I am being corrected by the Opposition Front Bench.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): It doesn't happen very often.

Karen Bradley: It always happens.

The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that these decisions do need to be taken. We do want to see devolved government. We want decisions and scrutiny to be undertaken in Stormont. That is the right place for those things to happen. I am not going to put a timeframe on it because we need to find something that has consent. As he will know, under the Belfast agreement, for constitutional changes in Northern Ireland, we would need the consent of all communities. Therefore, I do need to work through all the suggestions that have been put to me, but I would welcome suggestions from him, given his extensive experience of doing the job.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I would not really welcome this statement, but it is the right thing to do and it is the right approach, given the pressures to deliver public services. We would much rather these decisions were being taken back in Stormont, where they should be taken. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is not just about financial management and about getting the Assembly going again? It is also about the range of decisions that need to be delivered, based on an agreed programme of government—not just relying on the UK Government to step in when they absolutely have to.

Karen Bradley: I agree. My hon. Friend sums the situation up very well.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. Will she outline for the House what actions she intends to take on efficiencies within the different Departments, which she mentioned in her statement?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Northern Ireland civil service had started work on efficiencies before the Executive collapsed. Those things had been talked about within ministries while there were Ministers in place at Stormont, so this is about working forward from the programme of government to deliver those efficiencies, which Ministers had previously been looking at. I recognise that this is all terribly difficult to explain, but we are working within the boundaries of what we can.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I very much welcome the strong commitment in the statement to the Belfast Good Friday agreement. There is no doubt that Northern Ireland needs the funding—indeed, an end to austerity would be welcome in Bristol South and the rest of the United Kingdom—but in tying up the money for confidence and supply, the strength of that case is undermined. What impact assessment has the Secretary of State done on the confidence and supply money?

Karen Bradley: As I have said, the agreement on the confidence and supply money is publicly available on the internet. It recognised the priorities and the issues that needed support and additional funding. This process has not been easy—balancing a budget is never easy—but we have done it while mindful of the commitments made in the confidence and supply arrangements and the previous work that had been done.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Will the Secretary of State confirm that not all political parties—for instance, the Social Democratic and Labour party—were consulted on the actual content of the budget? Will she outline who made the political decisions in relation to the budget?

Karen Bradley: As the UK Government, we have had to take those decisions. I ensured that all parties saw the statement and the allocations and were allowed input into them, not only before last Thursday, when I got the final figures, but during that period, to ensure that they were all able to contribute to the work that we were doing.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and welcome the budget, but key decisions are urgently required, such as on the support for the victims of historical

institutional abuse and on legacy. Will the Secretary of State confirm that she has been informed by Departments that, unless key decisions are made, and made urgently, they will not be able to balance the budgets in those Departments for the next year?

Karen Bradley: That is not the advice that I have had from permanent secretaries. The hon. Lady is right to refer to two additional issues: the concerns about legacy and about the victims of institutional abuse. On legacy, the UK Government are committed to consulting on the Stormont House agreement and to setting up the relevant bodies. On historical abuse, the Hart inquiry was set up by the Executive before it collapsed, so it is constitutionally very difficult for any other party or Government to consider its recommendations; it was not a review instigated by the UK Parliament or UK Government. The hon. Lady absolutely describes the tension of the situation we are operating within.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for the statement and wish her many happy returns. It is interesting to note that the message that we are receiving from civil servants and permanent secretaries is that they cannot move on and make decisions as to where money should be spent. In the absence of an Assembly, and given that there is unlikely to be one for the foreseeable future, it is vital that we have Ministers making decisions—if not the Secretary of State, it should be other Ministers. When is that going to happen?

Karen Bradley: I have attempted to deliver in the budget the financial certainty that is needed to enable the public services to continue. If devolved government

were up and running in Stormont, Ministers in Stormont would be able to amend the way in which the budget operates, but I have done what I had to do to enable public services to continue and for public servants to have some certainty, within the restrictions of what is possible for me as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I wish the Secretary of State many happy returns; she has had cross-party agreement on that. I understand her caution, concern and reluctance to advance issues of direct rule but, on the statement and on providing a soft landing for that perpetual glide path that we have had for the past 14 months, may I encourage her to be bold and to provide the political opportunities for decision making for the benefits and interests of all the people in Northern Ireland, and to do so with confidence?

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his good wishes. I am committed to the Belfast agreement and the institutions that were set up under it. I want things to be in such a position that those institutions can be up and running and delivering for the people of Northern Ireland, with the politicians they elected delivering for them. That is what I am determined to do and I do not want to undermine that in any way. That is the very difficult balancing act that I have been operating under. I wanted to make sure that civil servants have the certainty and money that they need, but without undermining anything. I would welcome any suggestions from the hon. Gentleman and others about the sort of constitutional arrangements that could be put in place to get us back to devolved government.

United States Tariffs: Steel and Aluminium

7.5 pm

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): On Thursday 8 March, President Trump announced that the United States would impose a tariff of 25% on steel imports and a 10% tariff on aluminium imports after a period of 15 days, with the final day being 23 March. Canada and Mexico, with which the United States is renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement, have been exempted from the tariffs, subject to the successful conclusion of the NAFTA negotiations. For the products within the scope of the investigation, in 2017, the US accounted for 7% of UK steel exports and 3% of UK aluminium exports. In addition, the UK accounted for 1% of US steel imports and 0.1% of US aluminium imports in tonnage, at a value of £360 million and £29 million respectively. The President outlined that there is scope for further countries and certain products to be exempted from the tariffs.

From a UK perspective, as Members of this House know, the UK and the US are strong partners and allies, and the US-UK economic and security relationship is crucial. The US is our largest single-nation trading partner and accounts for a fifth of all exports, worth more than £100 billion a year. It is also the top destination for outward direct investment by the UK and the single biggest source of inward investment into the UK. We have a long-standing and special relationship with the US; however, that does not mean that if we disagree with something, we will not say so, and we do disagree with the US decision to implement tariffs on steel and aluminium imports based on national security considerations. Such unilateral trade measures have weak foundations in international law and are not consistent with the Department of Defence's own judgment in an investigation that was conducted on the basis of national security.

There is undoubtedly a problem of overcapacity in the global steel market, but our strong view is that a global problem requires a global solution, not unilateral action. The UK has worked hard to address the issue of overcapacity. The Prime Minister called for a forum of G20 members to tackle this issue, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy attended in Berlin in November; the forum agreed comprehensive policy solutions. Most recently, the Prime Minister raised it during her visit to China, which is the world's leading producer of steel and aluminium products. The UK will continue to work within the rules-based international trade system to tackle this problem.

Since the President asked the Department of Commerce to launch the investigation into the national security impact of steel and aluminium imports last April, the Government have made clear to the Administration on repeated occasions the potentially damaging impact of tariffs on the UK and the EU steel and aluminium industries. The Prime Minister has raised her concerns directly with President Trump. I have spoken on several occasions to the Commerce Secretary and to the US trade representative about the investigation, including this afternoon. I spoke again today to the director general of the World Trade Organisation, Roberto Azevêdo,

and I regularly speak to the EU Trade Commissioner, Cecilia Malmström. Several of my Cabinet colleagues have raised this issue with their opposite numbers. The Government have worked closely with the EU as part of our unified response. In addition, I assure right hon. and hon. colleagues that we have been in regular contact with the UK steel and aluminium industry throughout. I spoke to Gareth Stace at the weekend and again this afternoon.

There are two routes to petition the US for exemptions from the tariffs. The first, overseen by the US trade representative, will exempt countries with which the US has a strong national security relationship and which agree alternative means to address the threat to US national security from the relevant imports. The second, overseen by the Department of Commerce, will evaluate product exemptions if it is deemed there is no domestic US alternative and there are national security considerations, but only after a request for exclusion is made by a directly affected party located in the United States.

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will be assisting UK industry in working with US customers to build their cases for the exemption of individual products. I will be travelling to Washington this week for face-to-face meetings with the US trade representative, Ambassador Lighthizer, and Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross as well as leading members of Congress. I will be making the case for the UK as part of the EU. We have a strong defence and security co-operation relationship. As close allies in NATO, permanent members of the UN Security Council and nuclear powers, close co-operation between the UK and the US is vital to international peace and security.

As the House is aware, our current membership of the European Union means that the European Commission will be co-ordinating the EU response, and we have been clear that we will continue to adhere to the duty of sincere co-operation. The EU response is focused on three possible areas. First, the European Commission is preparing to introduce immediate duties on the US ahead of a World Trade Organisation dispute. The EU has shared a draft list of proposed items for duties and we expect it to publish this list early next week. Secondly, the EU can apply a safeguard measure of its own to protect the steel and aluminium industries from being damaged by an influx of exports to the EU caused by the displacing effect of US tariffs. Thirdly, the EU can pursue a dispute at the WTO. We are currently evaluating all aspects of these responses together.

We are clear that it is right to seek to defend our domestic industries from the direct and indirect impacts of the US tariffs, protecting both jobs and industrial capacity. We will also press for any response from the EU to be measured and proportionate. It is important that the UK and EU response works within the boundaries of the rules-based international trading system. Over the coming days, we will be working closely with British industry and the EU to seek swift clarification and mitigation. I commend this statement to the House.

7.12 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement and for his telephone call over the weekend.

The world steel industry is on the verge of a crisis. In our domestic industry, 32,000 workers in the steel industry are facing an existential threat to their jobs. Many of those men and women are angry that it has taken the Secretary of State more than 10 days since President Trump's initial announcement to come to this House and make a statement about the impact that this might have on their communities and what measures the Government are taking to protect their livelihoods. They expected better, and they had a right to do so, but I assure the Secretary of State that, for our part, the official Opposition will not seek to make this issue one of party political point scoring. Everyone in this House must work together. We will be constructively critical where we consider the Government can do better, but our fundamental position will be to work with the Government to achieve the best outcome for our steel communities, for our aluminium industry and for our wider economy.

The Secretary of State is correct that the fundamental cause of this crisis is overcapacity in the global market and a long-standing failure by Governments around the world to tackle dumping and unfair practices, but he should have acknowledged that this included his own Government. We have not forgotten that it was the Conservative Government in 2016 who sought to block EU plans to impose tougher tariffs on aggressive Chinese steel imports. Global over-supply has seen other countries dump their surplus—a surplus often created by actionable subsidies and lax enforcement of labour standards and workers' rights—at less than market value.

Although the global situation has not been created by President Trump, the manner in which he has gone about trying to resolve its impact on US producers is fundamentally wrong and threatens to tip a very bad situation into a full-scale global trade crisis. The application of 25% tariffs on steel and 10% on aluminium imports into the United States is unjust and unjustifiable. The suggestion that such tariffs are necessary under section 232 to mitigate a threat to American national security is patently false. The US Secretary of Defence himself has publicly stated that US military requirements represent no more than 3% of US steel production and that the Department of Defence is able to acquire the steel and aluminium it needs for US national defence requirements. The UK steel industry has made it clear that the amount of UK steel exports to the United States military industrial complex is “very small indeed”.

The Secretary of State says that Trump's tariffs have weak foundations in international law. In fact they have none. The truth is that the President is seeking to bully and threaten his trading partners to bring them weakened to the negotiating table. The temporary exemption for Canada and Mexico, making their position subject to a renegotiation of NAFTA that is favourable to the USA, is just one example. He is doing the same with the UK and Europe, where he wishes to reverse the US trade deficit.

Given that the Secretary of State accepts that the tariffs are unjustified, I ask him to consider that the two routes he outlined for petitioning for exemptions from them is to act as if they have a spurious legitimacy. This is precisely the trap that President Trump has set: “Negotiate with us and we will not bully you further.” In the part of Glasgow where I grew up, that was called a protection racket. If the Secretary of State does go down this route of trying to secure an exemption, will he give a commitment

now to be totally transparent about any price that he has to pay and any assurances that he has to give to the US Administration in order to get it? It is reported that, following the Australian Foreign Minister's meeting with Rex Tillerson, these tariffs may not be applied to Australia. However, it has also been reported that Australia has had to concede to American demands for a bilateral security agreement, which would see Australia forced to commit to greater military spending. Will the Secretary of State also be clear about how any such attempt by the UK to secure an exemption sits with the duty of sincere co-operation, to which he rightly referred in his statement?

President Trump is imposing these tariffs on national security grounds precisely because, under WTO rules, this means that article 21 of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade would not apply. This specifically prevents member states of the WTO from demanding clarity on the grounds of such pronouncements and prevents them from commencing dispute proceedings or taking retaliatory action. The President is seeking to undermine the multilateral rules-based system of the WTO, to which he has long been opposed. He has said that he would welcome a trade war and thinks that America could win it. He cares nothing for the viability of UK producers who have respected the rules. He is treating them no differently from their competitors who have not. As the US market closes to our exports, countries that would otherwise export into the US will seek to divert their production to the UK, which will tend to undercut domestic producers here even further.

What action is the Secretary of State taking to defend against this trade divergence? He must recognise that our industry is particularly vulnerable because we have a Government who pride themselves on taking the weakest possible approach to remedying unfair practices by their adherence to the lesser duty rule. Both the Trade Bill and the Taxation (Cross-Border Trade) Bill currently going through Parliament were opposed by the Labour party precisely because they proposed to create what the Manufacturing Trade Remedies Alliance described as

“one of the weakest trade remedy regimes in the world.”

Will the Secretary of State say whether he will consider tabling Government amendments to strengthen both the statutory representation function of the Trade Remedies Authority and the powers available to it, in line with the amendments proposed by the Opposition in Committee?

The Secretary of State spoke of the retaliatory measures that the EU Commission is preparing. What assessment has his Department made of the legal rights to recourse under article 8 of the WTO agreement on safeguards and what representation has he made to the European Commission's Directorate-General for Trade in relation to these measures? Is he persuaded that they would be lawful? Is he persuaded that they would be effective?

The Secretary of State is fond of painting international trade as a balance of consumer and producer interests. The fear of thousands of steel and aluminium workers in the UK is that he naturally leans too far in favour of lower prices for the consumer. He needs to prove to them that he will stand up for British industry, for their jobs and for their communities. They need confidence that he will tackle unfair practices that distort the market. If he does, he will have the Opposition's full support.

Dr Fox: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his co-operation over the weekend and for some of the constructive suggestions he made about how we might apply some further pressure to those US producers to enable them to seek exemptions for imports from the UK. He is right that there is overcapacity. The G20 global forum on steel excess capacity has made 28 recommendations. We now wait to see whether China will implement those recommendations, which is the key to sorting out the global overcapacity issue.

We have regularly said that we do not believe that section 232 was an appropriate vehicle for carrying out this investigation. Not only does the UK send some specifically high-end steel products into the United States that the US market is not necessarily able to provide for itself, so tariffs will apply an unavoidable increase in cost to American inputs, but we sell some specialist steel into the American military programme, making action taken against the United Kingdom on a national security ground quite an absurdity.

The hon. Gentleman is right to mention the sincere co-operation. I have made it very clear to the Commission that we continue to operate on that basis and that we will replicate the EU's trade remedies systems as we leave the European Union. I remind him, though, that the Labour party voted against the setting up of the Trade Remedies Authority, not the issues that relate to its operation. That was a dangerous thing to do. However, it is right that we regard this as a national issue. There is no fundamental difference between us on the basis on which the section 232 investigation was conducted, nor on the options that we believe the European Union should take as a response.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State stress to the EU that it is in our interests to try to take some of the tension out of this festering dispute, rather than to take it on to another height, given that the President is already talking about tariffs against German cars, for example? It is surely in our interests to get back to tariff-free or low-tariff business.

Dr Fox: The EU is taking countermeasures because the EU views section 232 itself as a safeguard. Any action that the United States were to take in response to that would be completely out of line with international trade law, as well as exacerbating an already tense situation.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): This really is a blow to those right-wing, free-market Brexiteers who argue that the US will welcome a trade deal with open arms. Anyone looking at the somewhat unhinged tweets coming out of President Trump's office will tell us otherwise. Given the Secretary of State's nationality and where he was brought up, I am interested to know whether he has raised the matter specifically of Scottish steel and aluminium, and the steel industry's impact on all nations of the UK. It was in 1992 that his Conservative Government closed Ravenscraig in Scotland, decimating 1,200 jobs and livelihoods, and it was the Scottish National party Government in Scotland who brought back into production the steelworks in Clydebridge and Dalzell and the aluminium smelter in Lochaber. We are fed up in Scotland with clearing up his Government's mess and we do not want to have to do it again.

We know from recent reports in the press that the geographical indicators of products such as Scotch whisky could be under threat in a US-UK trade deal. The Secretary of State may have seen the article in *The Scotsman* last week suggesting that Scotch whisky is "among the products that could carry a 'Made in America' tag after Brexit."

It further said:

"US lobbyists are calling for the UK to drop geographical name protections after Brexit to allow supermarkets to import American copies."

That would be outrageous.

Will the Secretary of State commit to protecting our valuable steel and aluminium industries and not to trading off our vital GIs for Scotch whisky in any trade deals? Given that a Tory Brexit would reduce UK GDP by 8% and put at risk some of our key exports, will he finally reconsider his approach to Brexit and admit that he was wrong in suggesting that leaving the EU single market and customs union could somehow be overcome by magical trade deals with the US and the EU that were going to be, in his words, the "easiest in human history"?

Dr Fox: It is not long since I remember the SNP being delighted at some of Mr Trump's tweets, when he was having some of his relationships with the previous SNP leader.

We can best tackle this issue as a united United Kingdom in line with our European Union partners. The hon. Lady dares to raise the issue of GI. These matters are in the roll-over of the EU trade agreement for which we are trying to get continuity in our current Trade Bill and the customs Bill. She needs to understand that she actually voted against the roll-over of those Bills that would have given the very protections for which she is asking.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): In its condemnation of President Trump's proposed steel tariff, the EU has implicitly accepted that it would be a similarly retrograde step to impose tariffs or engage in retaliatory measures with key trading partners. How will my right hon. Friend be using the President's announcement to make the case for open frictionless trade with the EU post Brexit and to assert the UK's position as a leading proponent of free trade in the 21st century?

Dr Fox: We are seeing the sort of problems that come from introducing protectionist measures. Tariffs will very seldom—for any length of time—successfully protect a domestic industry. They are likely to add cost to the inputs for that economy. In the United States, where 140,000 people are employed in the production of steel, there are also 6.5 million people in industries dependent on steel usage who will not be helped by an increase in the price. My hon. Friend makes a good point. We should all be recommitting ourselves to an open, liberal, global trading system, rather than considering impediments to it.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): If the Secretary of State wants to rebuff Donald Trump's claim that these tariffs are for national security reasons, he need only look at the President's tweet from six hours ago, in which he starts off down the avenue of saying,

“Oh, what about European farming tariffs or manufacturing tariffs?” It is quite clear that the Secretary of State and the European Union should be able to drive a coach and horses through the national security nonsense that the American President is putting up. Will the Secretary of State at least see this as an opportunity for us to work with our partners in the European Union and to use the leverage that we have in that alliance of 500 million customers to ensure that the Americans cannot walk all over us?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. A load of constituencies are affected. May I suggest that we have short answers and short questions, so that hon. Members can get in?

Dr Fox: We will work with our partners in the European Union because we are under a duty of sincere co-operation and because it makes sense to do so, but many other countries that are not members of the European Union are affected, and they will also make their voices known.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): My right hon. Friend has rightly mentioned that many of the UK's exports are very high value and specialised and that many of the supplies go to the United States military. Does he have an opinion at this stage whether the product exemption or the country exemption route offers the best hope for gaining an advantage for the United Kingdom?

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend asks a very good question, but it is difficult to answer until we can explore in greater detail with the US authorities exactly what the details will mean. In any case, whichever routes are the best to gain exemptions for the United Kingdom and the European Union are the ones that we want to follow.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What is the Secretary of State's view on comments in the past 10 days regarding a tit-for-tat approach—for example, with peanut butter, cranberry juice and other products that are consumed here? Is this a good and sensible approach?

Dr Fox: The hon. Lady asks a good question. As I said, the EU intends to impose countermeasures under article 8 of the World Trade Organisation safeguards agreement, because it believes that section 232 itself is a safeguard. The EU is therefore entitled to respond to that. Let me say, though, that this constant upping of the ante regarding what may happen and what countermeasures may be taken is not a sensible way for us to approach global trade. If she is suggesting that it would be wise for everyone to keep the temperature down, I entirely agree—100%.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement in terms of its content and its tone. Free trade is about being free to trade within the agreed rules; it is not about a free-for-all. May I strongly encourage him to reiterate that message both to the United States and to China?

Dr Fox: I take every opportunity to do so. It is worth remembering that we have in the United States a number of those who very strongly agree with us, not least inside the American business lobby, many of whom

may be harmed as a result of the measures that may be undertaken. We also have very strong and vocal allies in the US Congress, and I very much welcome them making their voices known in recent days.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I would be very concerned if the Government were pinning all their hopes on an exemption either for the UK or for the European Union, because there will still be a substantial knock-on effect of further dumping on our shores by the countries that behave badly when they are shut out of the US. Has the Secretary of State done an impact assessment for the British steel industry on the knock-on effect of further global overcapacity as a result of these tariffs?

Dr Fox: We are working alongside the industry to look at that. My colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy are engaged in that work. The hon. Lady knows that Skinningrove is a very good example of what I was discussing earlier. It is one of the areas where we make specialist steel that goes into the US programme, so the concept that we should be taken to task on a national security basis for providing the US with something that it needs for its own security programme does not make much sense.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): It seems to me that tariffs and protectionism fundamentally undermine the industries that they seek to protect. Can the Secretary of State confirm that it remains the British Government's position that we are committed to world-wide free trade? Will he be seeking in some way to gain a bilateral opt-out from these tariffs as soon as we are able to do so?

Dr Fox: As I have said, we will work alongside the European Union because we have a duty of sincere co-operation for as long as we are members. I have often taken the view that it is strange that people should want us to obey the rules when we want them and not when we do not want them. We have a legal duty as EU members to fulfil this. We intend to do so, and we will work with our EU partners accordingly. As a country—this has been true under Governments of both colours—we have believed in free trade. We have been a global champion of free trade. Let us remember that free trade is the means by which we have taken 1 billion people out of abject poverty in a generation, and we as a country should be very proud that we have been in the lead in that.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Can the Secretary of State give us some examples of how he has been able to use our close and special trading relationship with the United States to develop his vision of an open, liberal, multilateral trading system?

Dr Fox: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we are unable to conduct an independent trade policy for as long as we are members of his beloved European Union. We have a trade working group with the United States. We are looking at short-term liberalisation. We are looking at the areas that we might look at in a future free trade agreement. We are looking at co-operation in the WTO when we leave. As he sits and looks, for some reason, very smug, he would do well to remember his comments from yesterday, which were as mean-spirited as they were wrong in substance.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his answer to the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable).

My right hon. Friend says that when he goes to the United States, he will meet members of Congress. Will he continue to build the case with our Republican friends in Congress for the open, liberal trading system that we all support—on both sides of this House—to make sure that this can be delivered once we are out of the European Union?

Dr Fox: I would just correct my hon. Friend a little. We are not just talking to Republican members of Congress; there are very strong Democrat elements that are also in favour, and have long been in favour, of free trade. It is very important that in this country, in the United States and elsewhere, we work with like-minded people who believe in genuinely open, liberal global trade to achieve the ends that we have in common.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): The recovery that we have seen in our steel industry has been fragile. We are facing, as my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) said, not only the direct impact of tariffs on our exports but the indirect effects of other countries finding a home for displaced steel. The Government have been slow to act during the steel crisis in the recent past. Can the Secretary of State assure my steelworking constituents that the Government will do everything they can to fight for our industry at this time?

Dr Fox: As I made clear, the EU will impose countermeasures because it believes that what we are witnessing is a safeguard. We believe that that is not justified by the section 232 case on national security. We will, alongside the EU, take whatever measures are required to ensure that that is dealt with.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): What steps is the Secretary of State's Department taking to ensure that the UK can protect British businesses in all sectors from unfair trading practices once the UK leaves the EU?

Dr Fox: We touched on that earlier. We will do that by replicating the trade remedies measures that exist. To do it, however, we have to set up a Trade Remedies Authority under the Trade Bill that is currently going through the House. I hope that the Opposition parties will look again at their rather inexplicable decision to vote against the setting up of a Trade Remedies Authority.

Hannah Bardell: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Unfortunately points of order come at the end of the statement.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): In 2002, when the US Administration last did this, US economists estimated that it cost the US economy 200,000 jobs, and the Administration had to back down when the EU took them to the WTO. Will the Secretary of State reassure this House, and steelworkers in my constituency and elsewhere, that the UK will argue for the strongest possible safeguard measures within the EU's response?

Dr Fox: We hope that we can persuade the United States of an EU exemption so that we do not need to go down this particular route. I hope that sense will prevail. The hon. Gentleman is quite right to raise the 2002 issue. At that point, there was a great deal of activity where an alliance between the free trade elements in Congress and the business community in the United States came together to change the mind of the Administration at that time. I hope that such a combination would be successful this time.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): As we have heard, President Trump's announcement has caused widespread concern within America itself. What steps will the Government be taking to exert pressure on President Trump not only from the outside, as part of the EU, but from the inside, in terms of the American political and trading establishments?

Dr Fox: As I have said, there is a great deal of opinion inside Congress, within both parties, that this is a mistaken route to take. In recent days, I have had discussions with, for example, Paul Ryan on this very subject. We should be trying to mobilise all the allies we can. I mentioned earlier the co-operation from the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner). It is very important that we deal with this not just politically and through business, in that there is a role for the trade unions to play in talking to their opposite numbers in the United States where industries that are users of steel could potentially be damaged should the price of that steel rise as a result of tariffs. We can take a multi-layered approach to dealing with this issue, and we have a duty to use every one of the levers that we have.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Diversionary dumping is also the crucial issue for steelworkers at the Celsa plant in my own constituency. Does the Secretary of State not find it ironic that he is talking about the importance of working together across the EU to put in place the safeguards that are so necessary while at the same time advocating pulling us away from that and swimming against the tide alone? When he is speaking to his US counterparts, will he remind them that every single US state lost jobs as a result of George W. Bush's actions in 2002?

Dr Fox: As I have said, the EU can take counter measures on the basis that it believes that this is a safeguard. It could also make a safeguard of its own if it felt that a surge of displaced steel product was damaging our own market. I remind the hon. Gentleman that this is not just a dispute between the United States and the EU but involves all the countries in the world who are steel producers. The WTO is much bigger than the EU, and we will not be leaving the WTO as we are a founder member.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for referencing Skinningrove in his answer to the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), because, as he rightly says, there would be a serious threat to that plant as it produces very high-grade steel. Will he commit to all the necessary support for Skinningrove, especially given that the core products produced there for Caterpillar, an American firm, are not produced in the US market, and therefore pose no threat to US jobs?

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The exports from Skinningrove to Caterpillar make up about 25% of the site's output and he is right to say that US producers have poor capability in regard to this product. The application of tariffs is therefore likely to result in a rise in input costs, which would be to no one's economic benefit.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): We all hope that these tariffs will not be imposed on 23 March, but if they are, what steps will the Government commit to taking in order to support steelmaking in this country and our steelmaking communities?

Dr Fox: That date, 23 March, is not quite the deadline that it might appear. My initial discussions with the US Department of Commerce and the Office of the United States Trade Representative have made it clear that the period of exemption will continue some way beyond the initial introduction. Clearly, if there are going to be exemptions for the EU or the UK, we would want to see them introduced as early as possible. We will continue to push for exemption on the basis that I have set out today.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): When my right hon. Friend travels to Washington later this week, will he be accompanied by representatives from Brussels? Obviously, we are still an EU member and cannot act unilaterally—yet.

Dr Fox: I do not require a babysitter from the EU on my visit to Washington. We are in continuous contact with Commissioner Malmström and her team, because this is an issue that affects us all. It would affect us whether we were in the European Union or not, however, because these actions are being taken not just against the EU but against all steel producers globally, all of whom will be equally affected.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Did the Secretary of State, or for that matter the European Union, have advance knowledge of President Trump's statement on 1 March? Either way, what does this say about future relationships with the President?

Dr Fox: I am not sure how many people, if any, had advance notice of President Trump's initial announcement.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What representations has my right hon. Friend made to China with regard to tackling the global overcapacity of steel?

Dr Fox: As I have said, through the work that we are doing multilaterally, there are currently 28 outstanding recommendations that we expect China to apply. The Prime Minister raised this matter on her recent visit to China, and we are continuing the conversation. We understand China's need for the production of aluminium and steel for export and for its domestic use, but if we are going to have a rules-based system, the rules need to be obeyed. They also need to be transparent, and we need to have sufficient information to determine whether the WTO rules are still effective.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): If faced with a trade war, what post-Brexit trade defence mechanisms would little Britain employ against the might of the US economy?

Dr Fox: As I have said, the whole aim of policy at present in the UK, the European Union and beyond is to try to temper these proposals and to get exemptions so that we do not feel any of the impetus that might lead to an escalation of the current position.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): As tariffs go, 25% is particularly high and could lead to all sorts of unforeseen consequences. Is there any evidence that there will be trade diversion to the UK as a result of the US imposition of 25% tariffs?

Dr Fox: It is quite difficult to know in advance where there might be diversion. Again I make the point that our aim is not to deal with the consequences but to prevent the imposition of the proposed tariffs in the first place.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Secretary of State jokes that it is not clear that anyone knew about the President's announcement before he made it, but it is worse than that. Sometimes, it looks as though the President himself does not know what he is about to announce, even when he has started to announce it. All too often, it involves a tweet in search of a policy. Are not the really disturbing matters not only the growth of protectionism in America but the false promise that it offers to some of the poorest people in the United States, who in the end will not benefit one jot from it?

Dr Fox: The hon. Gentleman makes an even better point than he thinks he has—[*Interruption.*] Or, in his case, possibly not. In recent years, we have seen a worrying trend among G20 countries to impose protectionist measures. In 2010, we saw about 300 non-tariff barriers to trade being operated by the G20. By 2015, that figure had risen to around 1,200, so there has been a gradual move away from the concept of global free trade and a temptation for countries to impose non-tariff barriers. In addition to making the economic case, we should remember that those countries that have benefited from free trade should not be pulling up the drawbridge behind them and denying those benefits to developing countries.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Is China doing anything at all to help to cut the global oversupply of steel?

Dr Fox: That is a discussion that we are having constantly with China. It says that it is taking measures to reduce it, but as I have said, there are 28 recommendations outstanding, and only time will tell whether we are witnessing the correct action or merely the rhetoric.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Given what President Trump said during his election, none of us should really be surprised by this. If the Secretary of State does not manage to change the mind of the United States Government when he goes to Washington, and if they offer the United Kingdom an exemption, would that exemption come in from March 2019 or would it have to be subject to the almost ridiculous implementation period?

Dr Fox: Any exemption given by the United States will be in US law and will be determined by the US President, not by the US Congress and far less by European law.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Close co-operation between the UK and the US is vital to international peace. One route to petitioning the US for exemptions to the proposed tariffs would be to demonstrate the strong link with national security. How confident is my right hon. Friend that we can make a strong case on those grounds?

Dr Fox: Of course we have a strong national security linkage through our relationship in the Security Council and through being nuclear powers in the world, but it is always worth reminding our US colleagues who was alongside them in Iraq and Afghanistan and in many of the other conflicts that the United States has been involved in. The United Kingdom has never been found wanting as a loyal and steadfast partner in our bilateral security and in global security more generally.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Seeking exemptions from the US steel tariffs will not in itself protect the UK's steel industry from dumped diverted steel from the American market. Will the Secretary of State undertake to work with the EU to ensure that whatever measures are necessary to preserve the UK's steel industry are taken, and to work with the WTO to establish a more rational anti-dumping regime internationally?

Dr Fox: That is what we in the WTO are for. Its purpose is to ensure that there is a rules-based system and that the rules are applied, and that when the rules are not applied, there is sufficient mitigation to help those countries that are affected. In all the things that the hon. Gentleman has just mentioned, that is where we regard our duty as lying.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): As the Secretary of State will know from visiting Goodwin International in my constituency, Britain is a world leader in the specialist precision engineering of steel products. This is important not only for our British industry but for supplying US defence with equipment. How can we ensure that the US recognises that fact, so that those vital British products can continue to be exported to the States?

Dr Fox: The US Department of Defence has made it quite clear that it fully understands the contribution that the United Kingdom makes. Its report made it clear that it did not believe the use of section 232 was the appropriate means of dealing with concerns about global overcapacity. I hope that the good sense of the Department of Defence will be diffused throughout Washington.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): May I commend to the Secretary of State the experience of Bombardier? In recent months, it risked losing thousands of jobs because of unfairly imposed US tariffs of 300%. The winning formula for defeating that proposal—and having it unanimously thrown out in the US—involved a combination of trade unions, management, local MPs

and Ministers right across the Government, along with the personal intervention of the Prime Minister when she spoke to President Trump at the Davos economic summit. That strategy worked for Bombardier, so may I commend it to the Secretary of State and suggest that it is repeated in order to protect the steel industry in the United Kingdom?

Dr Fox: We have had, as I said earlier, a wide range of contacts in a wide range of areas. The International Trade Commission was ultimately the vehicle that sorted out the Bombardier case, so there are still in the United States those elements of an independent, free trading policy that we can rely on, on occasions when they are needed. It was not just the politics ultimately, hard though we tried for Bombardier, but the American mechanism itself—the ITC—that has a lot to be commended for.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Today it is steel and aluminium. Tomorrow it could easily be the photonics industry, which Torbay businesses that sell to the United States are part of. On Commonwealth Day, will the Secretary of State reassure me that we are also talking with our allies within the Commonwealth about what we can do to defeat a policy that will be as negative for the United States and for them as it will be for us?

Dr Fox: I said in an earlier answer that the people who have the most to lose if we move away from a global concept of free trade are the world's poorest. If we genuinely want people to be able to trade their way out of poverty, they can only do it in a genuinely free trading environment, and the more non-tariff barriers that advanced countries put up, the less chance they have of doing so. It is in everybody's interests to pursue a global free trade policy. This country has always shown the way on that, and this Government will continue to show the way.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Last but certainly not least, Dr David Drew.

Dr Drew: With regard to what the Secretary of State just said, will he do all he can to intercede with not just the US but the EU to make sure that agricultural products do not become part of a wider trade war? It is essential for the reasons he gave that less developed countries have continued access to all those markets.

Dr Fox: We can end on a note of perfect harmonisation, because there is no doubt that the more we can dismantle of the common external tariff that the EU currently has to the benefit of developing countries, the better. At last we have found a note of consensus.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Financial Guidance and Claims Bill will not be taken today, so we will deal with the next statement, and the rest of business will be completed. After the next statement, we will take points of order.

Protection of Civilians in Afrin

7.52 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to update the House on the situation in Afrin.

We are closely following developments in Afrin and wider north-western Syria. Over the weekend, Turkish and affiliated forces have continued their territorial gains and are now approaching the town of Afrin itself. We are concerned about recent reports of rising civilian casualties.

The Government have called for de-escalation and the protection of civilians, while recognising Turkey's legitimate interest in the security of its borders. We will continue to push for a reduction in violence and for consideration of the humanitarian needs of the population in the affected areas. The Prime Minister has raised the need for protection of civilians and proper humanitarian access with President Erdoğan, as has the Foreign Secretary with Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu. The Turkish Government have assured the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that they are working to prevent civilian casualties.

UK-funded partners have been delivering humanitarian assistance in Afrin, including health and protection services. Some of those activities have been suspended due to current hostilities, but our partners continue to meet needs where they are able and are pre-positioning supplies to help to meet the needs of those fleeing the area. That includes health supplies, blankets and food. UNICEF, other UN organisations and the World Health Organisation have temporarily suspended all activities in Afrin due to the recent military action.

As the Foreign Secretary said in his statement of 26 February, we are concerned about the humanitarian consequences of the operation in Afrin. We urge all parties to respect the law of distinction between civilian and military targets, to facilitate access for life-saving humanitarian aid and to allow freedom of movement for those caught up in the violence, in accordance with international humanitarian law.

The Syria conflict will soon enter its eighth year. The UK continues to make every effort to achieve our goals in Syria of defeating the scourge of Daesh and achieving a political settlement that ends the suffering and provides stability for all Syrians and the wider region. There ultimately needs to be a transition to a new, inclusive, non-sectarian Government that can protect the rights of all Syrians, unite the country and end the conflict, but we are pragmatic about how that might take place. Syria's future must be for Syrians to decide.

As the second largest bilateral humanitarian donor in Syria since 2011, the UK is at the forefront of the humanitarian response and is providing life-saving support to millions of people. Since 2012, across Syria and the region, UK support has delivered 26 million food rations, 9.8 million relief packages, 8 million vaccines and 10 million medical consultations. Last year alone, we provided clean water to more than 5 million people and contributed towards the formal primary and secondary education of more than 700,000 children affected by the crisis.

Ultimately, however, the only way to end the conflict is through a negotiated political settlement. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has emphasised,

including to his Turkish counterpart, the importance of a political solution and the defeat of Daesh. That must continue to be at the forefront of international efforts, and we are concerned about the possibility of the diversion of Kurdish fighters from this crucial fight. We remain committed to working closely with Turkey and other allies to find solutions in Syria that provide stability and bring to an end this terrible conflict. I commend this statement to the House.

7.56 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister's statement and thank him for advance sight of it.

Here we are again: Aleppo, Mosul, Raqqa, today Afrin, and perhaps soon Ghouta. Again and again, we stand here in this House while troops march into a city in the region with little regard for international law or civilian protection, putting hundreds of thousands of people at risk. Again and again, we express in this House our concern, alarm and anger, but it is never enough. It is just not enough. Time and again, those fighting in Syria are consistently failing to take precautions that protect civilians.

Just seven weeks ago, Turkey launched its so-called Operation Olive Branch, to remove what it saw as the Kurdish threat from Afrin. The Minister says that the protection of civilians must be balanced with "Turkey's legitimate interest in the security of its borders", but we must be clear: the incursion is neither legitimate nor justified. It should never have been allowed in the first place and has no basis in international law. An olive branch? There could hardly be a less suitable name for the assault.

Since then, even the most conservative reports estimate that several hundred Kurds have died. Shamefully, the Turkish forces have used artillery and other explosive weapons to target civilian areas. The Kurdish Red Crescent reports that in the month after the attacks started, 93 civilians were killed, 24 of them children, and 313 civilians were wounded, 51 of them children. UNICEF reported this morning that more than 1,000 children have died across Syria in just the first two months of 2018. The use of artillery and explosive weapons against residential areas is clearly prohibited by international humanitarian law. It is unforgivable that they are still being used. This is not an olive branch. It is a stick to beat the Kurdish community with.

The situation is evolving rapidly, so let me set out three particular concerns for the days ahead. According to reports, Turkish forces are advancing on Afrin right now, so we must do whatever we can to protect civilians. First, there are real concerns that when Turkish forces enter Afrin, there will be widespread atrocities as they seek to root out those they call terrorists. It is particularly disturbing to hear reports that at the centre of the assault, working alongside the Turkish army, have been some of the very same jihadists whom the Kurdish forces worked so hard to drive out of northern Syria.

Given the call by those in Afrin for civilians to form a human shield around the city, a siege and an assault on the city are likely to cause severe civilian casualties. What are the UK Government doing to apply pressure on Turkey to stop the assault and to respect international law? Will the Government make it absolutely clear to

[Kate Osamor]

Turkey, as a NATO ally, that anything less is unacceptable, and that we can never excuse throwing around the word “terrorism” to justify human rights abuses?

Secondly, *The Washington Post* has today reported accounts of thousands of Kurds already fleeing from the city of Afrin, fearing for their lives and what will happen if or when the city falls. What reassurance will the Minister provide that refugees and internally displaced people will be granted safe passage, and that the international community, including Britain, will step up to the plate and provide immediate humanitarian aid and long-term support?

Thirdly, let me turn to access for humanitarian aid and for the human rights monitors who can act as one of the greatest deterrents against civilian atrocities. What steps are the Government taking to urge Turkey to allow access for independent monitors to ensure that civilians are protected and that perpetrators of abuses are held to account? Now that UK-funded partners and UN agencies are suspending humanitarian activities, what steps are the Government taking quickly to restore full humanitarian access to Afrin, so that the UK and other partners can get aid in and save lives?

Those in the Kurdish community across the UK are watching, and they deserve to know that the UK is doing absolutely everything we can to help civilians in Afrin.

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions and for the way in which she has approached this subject. She poses some questions that it would be difficult for any Government to answer, but I will do my best. This is an area where the United Kingdom is not present on the ground, where it is difficult to get information out, and where UN workers are not able to operate. There is a limit on what we can actually deliver, but there will be no shortage of effort in trying to do everything that she recommends in terms of protecting civilians.

The hon. Lady is right to say that, once again, this is another part of the overall Syrian tragedy. Whatever the particular circumstances may be, it can all be traced back to a war waged by a President on his own people that will enter its eighth year in just a couple of days’ time. In his oral report to the Security Council on 12 March, the Secretary-General of the UN said:

“Syria is bleeding inside and out. There should be only one agenda for all of us: to end the suffering of the Syrian people and find a political solution to the conflict.”

We would all echo that, however hard it might be.

Let me deal with some of the points that the hon. Lady raised, particularly about the way in which this is seen. She gave a picture of how she perceives the situation and how the Kurdish community see it. We are not here to answer for the Turkish authorities, but they plainly take a different view. Their aim is to oust from the territory the YPG, which they see as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers party—the PKK—which is a proscribed terrorist organisation in Turkey and the United Kingdom. That is how they see their situation, which is why we refer to their territorial considerations and security concerns. The most important thing for us at the moment is to do all we can to bring that part of the conflict to an end and to protect people.

On the hon. Lady’s questions, first, in relation to any further assaults, the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister have both been in contact with their respective partners, and our ambassador made representations to the Turkish Government just three days ago on the up-to-date circumstances. I assure the hon. Lady and the House that everything we do is designed to persuade the parties to de-escalate the conflict as quickly as possible, and to allow humanitarian access and meet all other needs there.

Secondly, on what happens to people who flee and whether there are supplies, we have worked with partners to make sure that there are supplies in the area. We cannot get close in to Afrin, but we are doing our best to make sure that the UN agencies and others active in the area have supplies available if people are able to leave. We would wish them to be able to leave—I mentioned in the statement the distinction between civilians and those considered to be fighters—and we will be doing all we can in relation to that.

Thirdly, on access for monitors and the like, we would of course advocate that and we wish to see it, but the brutality and grimness of the war in that region means that there is a gap between anything we would seek in our deliberations in the House and what may be happening on the ground. I wish I could promise the hon. Lady that we will not be back here soon, but I do not think I can. I can, however, promise that we will do all we can to meet the humanitarian needs in the conflict. We recognise the pain being inflicted in the region, which can only end, as the Secretary-General has said, with a political resolution that will encompass all the various elements of the conflict.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, during which he said, “The Turkish Government have assured the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that they are working to prevent civilian casualties.” I take that to be diplomatic code for “We don’t believe you,” and that is supported by all the evidence coming out about the way in which the Turks are conducting this operation. The wretched truth is that our Kurdish allies in the war against the enemies of civilisation are being brutally treated by a NATO ally. Is there anything else we can do about it?

Alistair Burt: The UK has consistently raised the need to protect civilians and to de-escalate the operation. I repeat: the Turkish Government have assured the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that they are working to prevent civilian casualties. We believe the Turkish Government, and we will hold them to their statement.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): The devastation in Afrin represents a new front in the ongoing and devastating Syrian crisis—a seven-year civil and proxy war that has killed an estimated 500,000 people. As we all know, the laws of war strictly prohibit attacks targeting civilians or civilian structures, unless they are being used for military purposes, yet since Turkey’s aggressive airstrikes began, the local Kurdish health authority estimates that 220 civilians have died and more than 600 have been injured. The UN has said that the Afrin district, as well as nearby northern Aleppo, has a population of over 320,000, of whom the majority are classified as being in need and over 100,000 are now internally displaced.

To bring this home to my constituency, I have been speaking to a constituent of mine, a Syrian refugee called Kawa from the Afrin region, who was close to tears when he explained what is happening to his family. He told me his family are not safe. It is possible to contact them only every few days, but he spoke this morning to his brother, who said they are under siege and do not know what to do. They have no water, no electricity and not enough food. In his village near Afrin, every window has been shattered by bombs, and many homes are booby-trapped with explosives. Yesterday, his neighbour was killed by a bomb just by opening his front door. There is no safe place to go. These are civilians.

Will the Minister set out how the UK intends to put pressure on Turkey to end unlawful attacks and ensure respect for international humanitarian law? As a key member of the UN Security Council, what progress have the Government made in bringing about a political resolution in accordance with resolution 2254? Finally, on 20 February, the President of Turkey said that Turkey would “cut external aid” to Afrin. What are the UK Government doing to increase aid to the region and ensure that that vital aid gets there?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman started with a brief description of the horrors of this conflict, and in that he is absolutely right. The greater horror is that we have seen in recent times the shredding of the international norms on which we have tried to work for the best part of 70 years since 1945. If the UN Security Council cannot prevent conflict or bring it to an end, if we have moved away from the norm on the use of chemical weapons and that norm is not adhered to by parties on the UN Security Council and if we have seen the tactics of siege and hunger come back into modern warfare, then we risk losing everything that the international order put together after the horrors of the second world war was designed to prevent. Almost every conflict we now come across in the middle east has echoes of that. Unless we find a way to restore that international order, we will be debating this issue longer and it will give rise to the question what on earth states can do in response that does not go back to the old ways of dealing with conflict, which was a case of, “My stick has to be bigger than yours,” in order to prevent something. We all thought we had moved away from that, but maybe not.

In answer to the hon. Gentleman’s three questions, we will continue to talk to our NATO partner about its need for security and how this operation may be assisting it, and about the distinction it is drawing between humanitarian casualties and the need to protect civilians, and those from whom it seeks to protect its population.

In answer to the hon. Gentleman’s second question about diplomatic efforts, we are doing everything we can to support Staffan de Mistura. There have been some efforts recently. The Sochi and Astana process has come to an end, which means that the Geneva process is now the best bet for the political resolution.

On aid, £2.46 billion is the largest support that the United Kingdom has ever given to protect refugees in a conflict situation. There will be no shortage of support for those who need it, but the best way to help them is to bring the conflict to an end.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): My right hon. Friend said that he was pragmatic about how we could move to a negotiated political settlement. Will he set out the milestones he seeks to achieve along that journey?

Alistair Burt: Several have come about recently. The Syrian negotiation committee, which reformed after meetings in Riyadh, now represents Syrian opposition and has Kurdish representatives, in order to present a united front at the Geneva talks. The failure of a secondary process—the Astana process—means, as I said earlier, that there can be more concentration on Geneva. I understand that the special envoy, Staffan de Mistura, is working on a series of boxes so that people can talk about different things and gradually come back together. Most importantly, we continue, through UN efforts and resolutions, to demand humanitarian access and an end to conflict in conflicted areas. Attention should not be moved from the damage done and horrific circumstances in eastern Ghouta, and we call on all parties with a hand in that to desist from it. We also recognise that the seeds of Daesh have not been extinguished and, if any sense of that is lost, the conflict with them will re-arise as well.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Is it not the case that Mr Erdoğan is using the cloak of respectability—NATO—to hide an alliance with al-Qaeda on the ground and engage in this barbarous murder and slaughter of innocent men, women and children? Should not the British Government be absolutely clear that he must now end this offensive, and has not the time come to stop selling arms to this man, who is behaving like a despot?

Alistair Burt: We have been consistent in our calls for the situation to be de-escalated from the very beginning. Turkey is a NATO partner that relies on its partners for help and security. However, within recognising its territorial concerns and its concerns about its own security, we do indeed call for an end to the operations.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): This is an appalling and vindictive vendetta by Turkish forces against our strongest allies on the ground in the battle against Daesh and AQ. Is there absolutely no chance of a UN-brokered ceasefire so that perhaps we can put in peacekeeping forces to protect civilian people?

Alistair Burt: My hon. and gallant Friend speaks with great knowledge about the issues. Of course, UN Security Council resolution 2401 is already in effect, which calls for a 30-day ceasefire across Syria to allow for humanitarian aid and medical evacuations. However, as I said to the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), if calls for ceasefires—including even those in UN resolutions—are not based on practicalities on the ground, they are just disregarded, the impact being that international norms lose all effect. Of course, there should be an opportunity for the situation to be brought to an end so that there can be humanitarian access and the political negotiations that the UN Secretary-General has spoken about can encompass all the various conflicts in Syria, which is the only thing that will bring matters to an end.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): My Kurdish constituents are deeply distressed and angry about what is happening to civilians in Afrin. Hundreds

[Mrs Louise Ellman]

of people are being killed, and hundreds of thousands are being injured or are fleeing and being displaced. What hope can the Minister give to those people who are suffering so badly?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Lady will be aware, as we all are, of the recent press reports and the Sky News coverage over the weekend. I can give her the absolute assurance that the United Kingdom Government, through their repeated representations, are seeking to have the conflict de-escalated. We have been very clear in our contact with our NATO partner and ally so that this part of the conflict can come to an end as swiftly as possible.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): It seems to me that we have misread the Syrian civil war from start to finish. The facts on the ground are that Assad is winning the war: he is going to take eastern Ghouta and is now allied with our allies, the Kurds, in resisting a naked invasion from Turkey, which could involve the slaughter of thousands of innocent civilians. Although the Turks have been very generous in providing safe refuge for millions of Syrian refugees in Turkey itself, surely we should call out this invasion for what it is and, at this crucial moment, stand by the Kurds, without whom we would not have been able to defeat Daesh.

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend is correct in recognising the extraordinary contribution of the Kurdish people across the region, through Syria and Iraq, in pushing back Daesh at a crucial time. However, the complexities of the politics in that area—in parts of Syria and in Iraq and in Turkey—are what has led to the present situation. The history of the conflict in Syria, about which I have a certain amount of knowledge from 2010 onwards—not least the opportunities missed in 2013, when history might have been different had other things happened—is complex and difficult on all sides. All I can do is assure my hon. Friend that we will do all we can to seek to de-escalate the conflict, protect Kurdish civilians and achieve a resolution.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Affairs Committee went to Turkey in January 2017 and had meetings with President Erdoğan and his senior Ministers. It was made very clear to us that Turkey intended at some point to relocate hundreds of thousands of the 3 million Syrian Arab refugees who were in Turkey, into the areas on its border in the north and to prevent the Kurds from having a contiguous area under their control. Why did the international community not do more to stop that, and is the Minister really serious when he thinks that there will be a political solution and that Daesh will be defeated when Turkey sees its priority as stopping the Kurds rather than getting a political solution?

Alistair Burt: I am not sure that I know the answer to the hon. Gentleman's very good question based on his knowledge of the area. As I said a moment ago, the different aspects of this conflict, and the different reasons that some states are taking action, go back many years and are intended to sort out many difficulties and issues brought to light by the conflict against Daesh and the break-up of Syria. It is not possible for the United

Kingdom to say to other states what the end lines drawn on the map will be. Countries have concerns about terrorist activity. Turkey has been clear about that in relation to the PKK—a proscribed organisation both there and here—and we respect that in a NATO ally. However, as I have said in relation to what is happening in Afrin, we have been clear with our determination that there should be a de-escalation. And yes, we do call for a resumption of the negotiations between Turkey and the PKK—they only ended in 2015—to see whether there is a chance to bring that together. Perhaps the situation is not quite as hopeless as we sometimes feel when we look at the map.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the tone and content of the Minister's statement, but it is depressing to be back in the House talking about yet more horrors in a country that has seen more than its fair share of them over the past seven years of this conflict. Can he reassure me on what efforts the UK will take to protect civilians if there is a protracted Turkish siege of Afrin?

Alistair Burt: We have consistently raised the need to protect civilians and to de-escalate the operation. We want to see the safe, unimpeded and sustained delivery of humanitarian aid and services that are urgently needed across the region and in Syria as a whole. We will continue to press for that. My hon. Friend can be assured that, although we cannot predict the outcome, he can be absolutely certain of the efforts we will make to try to de-escalate the situation and to have a humanitarian situation that protects civilians and hopefully sees them safer.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I have several hundred constituents who hail from this part of the world, many of whom tonight are fearful for their loved ones in the city of Afrin. I have to tell the Minister that they expressed to me an increasing sense of betrayal that this Government and their allies are happy to welcome, indeed praise, the sacrifice of the Kurdish people in the fight against international terrorism, yet when it comes to upholding their political rights they are met with silence. Is it not the truth that the time has come to stop the pretence that the Turkish invasion of Afrin has anything to do with protecting Turkish territorial sovereignty and to admit that it is all about degrading the aspirations of the Kurds in any political settlement that will one day follow the end of this conflict?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman puts his own case and I recognise that. It is not the view of the United Kingdom Government. We recognise the territorial concerns of Turkey, but equally we have been very clear on the humanitarian impact of the conflict and on the opportunity to find a political resolution to the issues that have beset the area for too long. That solution will not come about through conflict; it will come about through political dialogue, which is of course made more difficult by the circumstances. That is why the United Kingdom continues to urge de-escalation, humanitarian access and relief for the families of the hon. Gentleman's constituents, about whom he speaks so eloquently.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): The Turkish Government have assured the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that they are working to prevent civilian casualties,

but reports show that they are actually increasing. Can the Minister confirm how the UK will ensure that civilians are protected from a Turkish siege of Afrin city?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, but the honest answer to her question is that I cannot ensure it and the United Kingdom Government cannot ensure it. That would be to suggest something that we just do not possess and it seems inappropriate for me to do so. All I can say is, along with others in the international community, we will continue to make the representations we can. We moved for a ceasefire in Syria in general, UN resolution 2401, which the Secretary-General spoke about just a few days ago. We worry that these norms are not adhered to. In the immensely complex situation of northern Syria—its Turkish border, what has been experienced in Turkey over the years and the long-standing conflict—the United Kingdom Government can give an assurance on none of this. All we can say is that we are very clear that humanitarian considerations must come first. There must be humanitarian access. The best way to deal with almost any of the conflicts that have arisen in the area is through political dialogue, not the escalation of conflict that will lead only to the resurgence of conflict as soon as this one is over.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister is right to urge restraint from Turkey and other partners in the region. What is the Government's assessment of the Foreign Affairs Committee's conclusion on the link between the PKK and the YPG, which is central to understanding what is driving Turkey? Does he share my fear that in Afrin and other areas of Syria there may be a long period where the protection of civilians is under threat while we try to get a political settlement and decent governance across areas that are war-torn at present?

Alistair Burt: Once again, the hon. Gentleman speaks with great knowledge of the area. He asks two particular questions. As I said in evidence to the Select Committee, the United Kingdom recognises some similarities in terms of ideology between the PKK and the YPG, but not the direct link that is claimed by Turkey. That is why we proscribe the PKK, but not the YPG. We are aware of the issues of similarity in origin of ideology and what people claim, but we do not see the link in the same way. But his second point regarding the long-term nature of this is entirely real. The longer the conflict as a whole goes on, the more there will be the opportunity for issues of long standing to be settled with the disruption that is currently taking place in Syria. That is why the best opportunity for peace and security all around is to support the Geneva process, as we are, and to work as hard as we are diplomatically to get the parties to find a better answer to the conflict. As the region amply shows, the only certainty in the region is that, if arms are taken up by one group against another, sooner or later the other group will take up arms against the other as well.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I thank the Minister for his statement and for the eloquence of his answers, which reflect the view of so many Members: desperate sympathy for the Kurds, who have been fighting Daesh and Islamic jihad for years—frankly, often on our behalf—and the sense of helplessness we all feel about what is happening in Afrin. My question is on the considerable

investment, money and humanitarian aid the United Kingdom has put into the area. Are there any specific additional elements of humanitarian aid that he feels the Government could perhaps provide to help the people who are suffering in Afrin?

Alistair Burt: At the moment, no. I think the honest answer is that I cannot see anything that we could currently add that would make a significant difference beyond what we are already seeking to do. I have been quite clear that we need to make preparations to ensure that when there is access, or when civilians leave the area, there are the food, water and medical supplies that people need. We are consistent in supporting UN resolution 2401 to seek access and the de-escalation of conflict to allow opportunities to be created both for dialogue and to protect the people. If there was anything new that we could think of to add to it we would, but meanwhile we are working with all the partners we can to seek to de-escalate and get the humanitarian access that is crucial.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): We should all be appalled by the scenes affecting civilians in eastern Ghouta and Afrin, but our ability to influence the operational military tactics of Daesh, Assad or Russia in those situations is very limited. However, Turkey is a member of NATO. Can the Minister say whether there has been direct contact between the Defence Secretary and his counterpart in Turkey and, indeed, military-level—officer-level—contact about conduct, tactics and the importance of Turkey adhering to international humanitarian law?

Alistair Burt: In answer to the hon. Gentleman's good questions, I cannot speak for Defence Secretaries or Defence Ministers. I can say that there has indeed been military contact but not to the extent that he is saying, because it was almost a question about tactics and everything, and that would not be in any way appropriate. The approaches of defence, ambassadors, Prime Ministers and Foreign Secretaries have been consistent on the de-escalation of the conflict and the need for humanitarian access. That is the approach, but as a NATO partner, other partners are involved as well. The United States has a significant interest in the area and in the conflict coming to an end as soon as possible.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): As has already been mentioned by Members on both sides of the House, the Kurds have been key allies in our fight against Daesh. Just in the interests of clarity, do the Government consider Turkey's continued attacks on Afrin as contravening UN Security Council resolution 2401? If so, does the Minister not agree that condemning them in the strongest possible terms is not only the right thing to do but crucial if we are to restore faith in the international order and any hope of bringing about a political resolution of the crisis?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman puts his question very well and goes to the heart of it. If resolution 2401 is to mean what it says, it is a ceasefire for the whole of Syria. The United Kingdom was part of that and it stands by it. As I said earlier, what happens with resolutions now is that, if there is not sufficient will on the ground, we do not get where we need to be and the international

[*Alistair Burt*]

order is affected. That is one reason why we are so consistent in talking to our Turkish partner about de-escalation, the need for de-escalation and the need for humanitarian access and in urging all parties in the area to try to find a way beyond the conflict.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Last weekend, a Kurdish constituent dissolved in tears at a local meeting about something else—she was very worried about her family. What can we do to take evidence so that, in future, war crimes can be prosecuted in an international court of justice?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Lady goes further than I can on this issue. Any war crimes allegations have to be brought to the appropriate authorities. The United Kingdom has worked extremely hard over the past few years to provide the opportunity for those in Syria to collect evidence of crimes, wherever they may be. Again, one can understand her constituent, but throughout that area, there are families in tears over each border about an atrocity committed. This is the tragedy for the United Kingdom as it tries to work with others to bring an end to this and to the violence that begets violence. Only by dealing with this in the manner suggested by the UN Secretary-General will we get an end to it. Individual aspects of justice and accountability are crucially important—absolutely—but we will work for a resolution to the conflict as a whole, which we think is the right thing to do, both for the Kurdish communities in the area and those who feel threatened by terror.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Minister will be aware that there is a Kurdish community in my constituency, too, as we have discussed this in the recent past. The Kurdish community in Glasgow has a mixture of sadness and anger about the events that are going on in Afrin. Given that the city of Afrin is under siege, with no water and electricity, can I invite him to join Members on both sides of the House in condemning the invasion, which is resulting in hundreds of civilian deaths and more mass displacement in the entire region?

Alistair Burt: What I can do is make reference to what I said earlier about the return of tactics of siege and ignoring humanitarian norms and international humanitarian law. Conflict is a desperately retrograde

step that all communities in the region will suffer from the longer it goes on. That is why the United Kingdom calls unequivocally for a de-escalation in this conflict, humanitarian access and the negotiations and dialogue that are the only thing that ultimately will end the conflict throughout the region.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The Minister said that the Government intend to hold the Turkish Government to account for the representations they have given about preventing civilian casualties. Can I press him on the specific steps that the Government will take to do that? Will they press for independent monitoring and an investigation of any alleged breaches of international law?

Alistair Burt: On holding people to account, the United Kingdom would hold to account any party that is guilty of any crimes in a conflict in the same way, through international structures and organisations. Monitoring on the ground is exceptionally difficult. We must be entirely practical about this. The holding to account is the same holding to account of any party in a conflict. We have been very clear, as I said. We understand the origins of this and why Turkey has the concerns that it does; but equally, we recognise the risk of the conflict diverting attention from the regime and from Daesh. There is already evidence that, as the conflict in Afrin has grown, others elsewhere are taking the opportunity to start up their operations again, which is just further misery for the people of Syria. I again go back to the Secretary-General and his determination, through Staffan de Mistura, to try to find an overall settlement because, ultimately, that is the only thing that will end the conflict between the parties and the pain that is undoubtedly being suffered tonight in areas of that region.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that Turkey's assault on Afrin was entirely unjustified and had no basis in international law? If he does, what specific steps will the Government take to ensure that Turkey is held accountable for the war crimes being perpetrated in Afrin?

Alistair Burt: I think that I set out what the UK thought of the origins of this at the beginning of my statement, and it does not entirely align with what the hon. Gentleman has said. He has spoken for himself rather than the Government on this occasion.

Points of Order

8.35 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your advice. One year ago today exactly, on 12 March 2017, the Foreign Affairs Select Committee published its ninth report, “Article 50 negotiations: Implications of ‘no deal’”. We also published several other reports last March, on Turkey and Russia, and our second report on political Islam, responses to which were received from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on 20 July and published as soon as the Committee was re-established in September. We have received no response to the report on the implications of no deal.

I raised the matter with the Foreign Secretary when he came before our Committee on 1 November and reminded him that the Committee had not yet received the customary response within two months. He said:

“I think you are asking the wrong Department. I think it is DExEU that is drafting the response to your excellent report.”

I asked whether he had seen any draft, and he said:

“Not that I am aware of.”

Then he promised:

“I will make sure we take it up with DExEU”,

and I said: “It is eight months.” He said:

“Thank you, I will make sure that we take it up.”

To date, despite expecting a response, the Committee has not received one from the Department for Exiting the European Union or the Foreign and Commonwealth Office—one year after the report’s publication. Madam Deputy Speaker, can you suggest any course of action that can be taken? I am speaking on behalf of the Committee at the request of our Chair. What can we do to get the basic courtesy of a response from the Government on a matter of topical and vital interest to our country and our Parliament? How can we get the Government to respond, as they are supposed to do, to a Select Committee report?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Member for giving me notice of his intention to raise this issue on behalf of the Foreign Affairs Committee. It is certainly unsatisfactory that the Government have not replied to the Committee’s report, if indeed it was published a year ago. It is understandable that there is sometimes a delay during an election period—it should normally be two months—but clearly a delay of a year is something quite different. On what he can do about it, I hope that his concern has been noted on the Treasury Bench and that the Departments involved will now get together and resolve the issue, so that the Committee can have a response as soon as possible.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your advice. Earlier in the statement, the International Trade Secretary referred to my colleagues in the Labour party and the Scottish National party as being completely opposed to a Trade Remedies Authority. That is categorically incorrect. You will know as well as I do, Madam Deputy Speaker, that voting against badly developed policy or processes is very different from voting against a concept in its entirety. The Secretary of State did not serve on the Trade Bill. He is a doctor but perhaps he has not done his homework on this occasion. My colleagues in the

Labour party and we in the Scottish National party tabled a number of amendments to improve the Trade Remedies Authority, its process and the way in which it was due to operate, none of which were taken on board or accepted by the Government. What can I do to ensure that the Secretary of State comes back to the House and sets the record straight?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Lady has made very clear what she feels about the remarks that were made. The Bill will return to the House, and I suggest that she continue to express her view then. I am sure that she will do so and that the Labour Front-Bench team will do so as well.

FINANCIAL GUIDANCE AND CLAIMS BILL [LORDS]

Bill to be considered tomorrow,

Business Without Debate

PETITIONS

Ordered,

That Susan Elan Jones be discharged from the Petitions Committee and Daniel Zeichner be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.*)

PETITION

Accessibility in Chinley Station

8.41 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I rise to present a petition to improve access at Chinley station. It has been signed by more than 800 local people and rail users, thanks to the Chinley and Buxworth transport group.

Chinley is a key station on the Manchester-Sheffield line that is used by thousands of commuters but is also required by ill and disabled people to attend hospital appointments. As there is a regional centre of excellence for disabled children and adults, the station is greatly needed, but the platform can be accessed only via a steep metal footbridge on which injuries regularly occur.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Chinley station on the mainline between Manchester Piccadilly and Sheffield is inaccessible as the only access to the platforms are via steep steps; further that Chinley station is situated at the heart of a growing commuter village which acts as the gateway to the Peak District; and further that members of the Chinley and Buxworth Transport Group have continued to campaign for further improvements, as transport should be accessible for everyone.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department for Transport to make improvements to Chinley station so that the public can have level access to the railway at Chinley.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002117]

Respite Care for Vulnerable Adults: Teesside

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Mims Davies.*)

8.42 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to highlight an issue which is specific to Teesside, but which I am sure will have parallels throughout the country. Let me start with a well-worn quotation:

“If you’re one of those families, if you’re just managing, I want to address you directly. I know you’re working around the clock, I know you’re doing your best, and I know that sometimes life can be a struggle.”

Ministers are probably fed up with Opposition MPs quoting those words spoken by the Prime Minister just 20 months ago, on the steps of Downing Street. We keep mentioning them in many different contexts while we see our communities suffer as the promise that followed fails to meet their needs.

Parents of some of the most vulnerable people in our community believe that there is a respite care crisis in Teesside. No one works harder around the clock, doing their best and struggling to cope and care, than the parents and siblings of vulnerable adults, some of whom have the most complex needs imaginable. Those vulnerable adults, with some of the most extreme personal needs, may be in their 30s, 40s or even 50s, which means that the parents caring for them are in their 50s, 60s or 70s. We as a society owe those parents and carers a huge debt of gratitude. They choose to care for their loved ones at home. They do not hand them over to the state because they cannot cope; they get on with the job. They endure the sleepless nights, they clean up after their family members, and they give them the love and dedication that they need. To be honest, they do not ask for much in return for the huge burden they shoulder on behalf of us all, yet we often let them down by failing to provide the support they need, and on Teesside that appears to many to be getting worse instead of better.

I know that this issue is not exclusive to Teesside, but this evening I want to speak on behalf of the parent carers whose loved ones use the residential provision at Bankfields and Aysgarth on Teesside, and all those families who rely on residential respite care to give them a break from caring and have just a little bit of time for themselves.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate; we have almost an hour and fifteen minutes to speak on the subject, which will be nice. One in 10 people in Northern Ireland are carers, and what the hon. Gentleman is describing is happening in Northern Ireland as well. Does he agree that short-term respite care must be provided to assist in securing the long-term benefit of keeping people in their homes and semi-independent, and that respite care should be offered, and should not have to be begged for?

Alex Cunningham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I agree with him: the longer people are supported to stay at home, the longer they are not an even greater financial burden on the state. I will develop that theme later.

Such is the crisis in health and social care in our country that our NHS commissioners face difficult choices, and families are very worried that they could be facing a substantial cut in the provision offered to them as the local clinical commissioning groups seek to stretch the limited resources they have to meet an increase in demand for support. The CCG for north Tees and Hartlepool and the South Tees CCG are reorganising the way they provide residential respite care. When I met the north Tees chief executive on Friday, she told me of the need to have needs-based services and the plan to review exactly what each individual needs. I know, and so does the Minister, that we must have equity in the system and meet the needs of each individual, and I do not have a problem with that, but, sadly, the review is being interpreted by the families as a cut in provision, with some believing they could lose up to half their respite nights, which they are very anxious about.

I definitely agree that provision should be right to meet the needs of the individual, but this issue is much greater than that: it is also about the needs of the whole family, and perhaps the CCG should have conducted a needs assessment before deciding on the review. In fact, I have always thought that the respite care was very much for the family—an opportunity to take a break from their caring responsibilities, to recharge the batteries and to prepare to resume what they see as their duties.

The CCG has been at pains to stress to me that its proposals do not necessarily mean that there will be a huge reduction in the number of respite nights, but it recognises things will change for some people and is working with families and piloting different ideas to try and improve provision and reassure them. While I think the CCG could have handled this whole business better and understood more comprehensively the issues from the perspective of the families and the various local authority and joint health scrutiny groups who oppose the plans, I cannot say it is its fault.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): In my constituency, a home providing respite care for very disabled and unwell children called the Manor is being closed, and I very much agree with my hon. Friend that this issue should be about the whole child, including the family, and the respite having that night provision gives to the family. In my constituency, that night provision is being entirely cancelled; does my hon. Friend agree that the impact of that must be assessed?

Alex Cunningham: I certainly do agree. I opened my speech by talking specifically about this being not just a Teesside issue, but an issue across the country, and it is a tremendous challenge to Government to plan for the future; I will also be developing that later in my speech.

I know that the team members at the CCG dealing with respite and wider provision are dedicated to their jobs and that they too have been distressed as we have gone through this process, and I for one appreciate the strains of dealing with such sensitive issues. They are trying to do their best within what they say are the ring-fenced resources available, although I personally could have hoped that they would have kicked the Government for failing to provide the resources needed.

Currently, respite is provided in two NHS centres of excellence, Aysgarth and Bankfields, but what are they planning to do now? The best of the options available

to carers is this perceived reduction in residential care provided by the expert and nursing staff for their family members, and then the provision of a menu of alternative choices, largely without nurses. The choices include beds in care homes, hotel rooms, adapted caravans and even in carers' own homes. Could we really see a vulnerable adult accommodated in a caravan somewhere and looked after by people in whom their parents may struggle to have confidence? What about the risk assessments for that menu of provision? Who is going to check that all the new people caring for these vulnerable people are both trained and suitable for this role and that the premises are suitable? What respite is it for a carer if they have the respite worker under their own roof? That is not much of a break for the carer or the family member.

To be fair to the CCG, it has promised that there will always be appropriately trained staff to offer the care and support required. Sadly, however, it is yet to provide the families with the reassurance they need, and the uncertainty is torture for them. So much more needs to be done to drive understanding. We also have to ask whether changes that cause such disruption are really appropriate in 21st-century Britain when carers do not know what the future holds. Our provision should be improving, not deteriorating in practical terms nor in the eyes of the carers.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Does he agree that this country needs to be doing a great deal more to support carers? I think back to the 1997 Labour Government, when national insurance contributions towards carers' pensions were introduced. Is there not a case for looking at things in the round and doing more to support carers?

Alex Cunningham: I am a member of the all-party parliamentary group on carers, so I spend a bit of time on this subject. I do not know whether we will ever get to a point at which we are content that we have done enough, but we need to do much more.

I recently wrote to the Hartlepool and Stockton-on-Tees CCG regarding the consultation that was taking place at the time. It confirmed that it is committed to retaining the full £1.5 million fund for this provision, but it highlighted that the money will have to be spread further to reach more families. That confirms that provision is being diluted, and when provision is diluted, it is cut, and it will be the carers who will pick up the extra responsibility.

I accept the CCG's point that more people need respite services, but the answer is surely to increase funding and provide the services that are needed, not water down what is available and provide a poorer-quality service. Demands for such services will continue to increase over the coming years as more vulnerable, high-needs young people grow into adults, live longer and need the kind of comprehensive support given by the people I have been speaking of today. The cost of meeting the services will therefore go up and, yes, although the cost may in some cases be shared between the NHS and local authorities, neither of them can sustain quality services for a growing cohort of people when the income simply is not there.

According to the National Audit Office, Stockton Council has had its budget cut by 52% since 2010 and spends around 57% of its money on social care. Does

the Minister realise that we are facing a potential crisis? Does she understand the tremendous role that carers take on? Does she appreciate the need for comprehensive respite care to give them a few days' break, or does she think that they will get by and manage? Well, while some may, others will not and will face the difficult decision to hand their loved one over to the health service full time because they simply cannot cope any more. What short, mid and long-term planning are Government doing to ensure that we have a strategy in place not just in Teesside but across the country to cope with increased demand and provide the increased resources required to deliver appropriate provision?

My colleagues on Teesside—my hon. Friends the Members for Stockton South (Dr Williams), for Hartlepool (Mike Hill), for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) and for Redcar (Anna Turley)—have all listened to carers' stories and recognise that they are facing tremendous anxiety over what the changes will mean to respite care. Others have listened, too, including the scrutiny committees of our local authorities. The joint health scrutiny committee, a cross-committee of local councillors, stated that it could not endorse either of the two options or any other that would reduce provision. None of the councillors believe that the CCG has covered itself in glory in its handling of the matter, and they can see why those dependent on these services for a decent quality of life have lost all trust in the organisation, feeling that it has ignored their pleas and failed to understand their needs.

There is another dimension to this. I applaud the CCG for the comprehensive consultation exercise—and it has been comprehensive. Sadly, the CCG has failed to get its messages of reassurance across to these needy families, who interpret that as its having failed to recognise the anxieties created by the process. Carers tell me they have no understanding of any new criteria that will determine who gets what services. They feel that they are being left in the dark. Yes, I praise the public consultation by the CCG, but at the end of day the options were severely limited. I repeat that there is no extra cash to cope with increased demand.

I have heard that at one meeting with councillors, the CCG said that carers cheered when option 2 was chosen over option 1, which would have ended all provision at the two nurse-led residential units. Naturally, the carers cheered the better of two bad options. There was no option at all to extend the current provision or provide resources to cater for the additional needs of new adults coming into the system, which is something that Ministers need to reflect on. The CCG also stated that this was not a cost-cutting exercise. I know that the money is ring-fenced, but with the need to look after more people with the same money, there are fewer resources per person in the system. While I remain critical of the CCG and the way in which it has handled this issue I recognise that in many ways it has been backed into a corner. It knows the demands on its service, but does the Minister? It knows that there are more people needing services, but there is no additional funding to provide that.

We all know that we have a health and social care crisis in our country, and while local authorities can shift the burden on to local council tax payers as Government cuts bite deeper, it is not something that our local NHS commissioners can do. They cannot tell local tax payers that they are sticking an extra 3% on their bills to try and alleviate the shortage of funds in

[Alex Cunningham]

areas such as respite care. That leaves the buck well and truly in the Chamber, with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and the Minister. My plea to her is simple. Will she take an interest in what is happening on Teesside with respite care for vulnerable adults? Will she examine the proposals, which parents see as a cut to provision for families in the area?

This is much bigger than Teesside. Yes, I know that there are CCGs up and down the country facing the same issues, so perhaps it is time for Ministers to consider the whole policy area of supporting carers such as those I have talked about this evening and find ways of providing the NHS and, for that matter, local authorities with the resources that are needed. Will the Minister instigate a much-needed policy review to see how we can do much better as a country to support carers?

Many families—I have talked to several—are living on the edge, struggling to cope with the needs of their loved ones. They have no intention whatsoever of handing them over to the state, but they need comprehensive respite care services to give them a little of their own time and space. We as a nation owe them no less.

8.58 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on securing the debate. I also congratulate him on his leadership in this area and on his engagement with the families and the clinical commissioning groups.

The challenge of being a carer for an adult with complex needs is a lifelong challenge. I have enormous respect and admiration for the people who do this work. My grandmother's sister—I have just worked out that she is my great-aunt—has spent her life looking after several different adults with complex needs. She adopted them as children and has cared for them. I have seen the enormous amount of love and compassion that she has given them, and I have seen in all my constituents who have contacted me, and in my work as a GP in my constituency, the love and compassion that go into looking after adults with complex needs. But this comes at a cost for carers, mainly to their health. They often prioritise the needs of the person they are caring for and do not think about preventing their own ill health problems or about properly looking after problems as they arise. There is also a time cost. Being a carer for an adult with complex needs is a massive time commitment, a money cost and a career cost. So there is huge cost.

Jim Shannon: It is also important to get the issue of young carers recorded in *Hansard*. I have a vibrant young carers association in my constituency, in Regent Street, Newtownards. The work they do with elderly family members is the reason those families are together, so the issue of young carers is so important. Does the hon. Gentleman encounter the same issues I have in my area when it comes to young carers? Does he agree on the importance of keeping families together and of what young carers do?

Dr Williams: I thank the hon. Gentleman for highlighting the needs of young carers. In my constituency, as in those of all Members in this House, there are young

people who grow up suddenly when they find themselves needing to be carers and who really do hold families together.

In the context of how difficult this caring can be and the tremendous efforts that people make in order to keep their loved ones well and look after them, the provision of occasional respite is the least we should be doing as a society. It is the least we should be doing to say thank you and to sustain the incredible efforts that these people are making. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North, I give some credit to the two CCGs involved, Hartlepool and Stockton-on-Tees CCG, and South Tees CCG, for taking some responsibility for this. We all see the constant jostling between local authorities and commissioners of health services about who should fund these issues in a time of austerity, but our CCGs have stepped up to the plate and taken ongoing responsibility for funding these issues.

However, a number of constituents have contacted me in what I can only describe as a state of panic during these consultations and since the outcome of the consultations was announced. They are fearful that their much-needed breaks are going to be taken away from them. As my hon. Friend pointed out, their fears may well prove to be ill-founded, but this should not mean that they should be discounted. Change is always difficult for people, but the possibility of services being cut has caused genuine anxiety for these people and we should rightly be recognising it. We all know that caring can be physically demanding, but it can also be mentally demanding, especially if it is being done for long periods of time. Adequate respite is essential if these carers are to be able to maintain their own health and wellbeing. It is also essential that carers are closely involved in any decisions about what is adequate and appropriate for their family members and for themselves. As he has said, a respite package should be designed around the needs of the whole family, not just those of the individual with complex needs.

What we are seeing, though, is limited funding. I do not know whether this is ring-fenced funding that the CCG has or whether it is taken from an overall pot, but there is limited funding. CCGs have a number of conflicting priorities. We know that throughout the health service demand is increasing and outstripping any increase in resource that it has. The limited funding and the rising need for this particular kind of care mean that for some people packages of care are likely to be reduced. That is causing people significant anxiety.

Before I finish, let me say that our experience on Teesside illustrates that health and social care do not exist in isolation from each other. Some small steps have been taken, including by changing the Department of Health's name to the Department of Health and Social Care, but respite care is a really good example of where some more concrete steps can be taken to bring together health and social care funding. There should be a partnership between local authorities, clinical commissioning groups, parents, carers and the people with complex needs, so that they can work together. Respite care is an issue on which we should be seeing integration at its best. If we are talking about integration, I have to take the opportunity to talk about the forthcoming Green Paper on social care. It is inconceivable for me that in 2018 we should be considering social care in isolation. Will the Department think

about whether the Green Paper should really be on health and social care together, rather than just on social care?

I pay tribute again to the carers who have come together to fight for the very best services for their loved ones. They deserve for us to listen, to consider and to act, so that they get the respite services that they need for themselves and their families.

9.6 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I wholeheartedly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on securing this debate, which is crucial to some of the most vulnerable people who face the most difficult challenges in their lives. All too often, their voices are not heard in this place, so this debate is extremely important and I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for securing it and for enabling our discussion of this issue.

I was keen to speak in this debate because, at the very first surgery that I held after I was elected three years ago, the very first people who came to see me were the carers of a disabled adult with severe needs. I was shocked to hear that they had not come to discuss their concerns about themselves, or even about the quality of care—although of course they were concerned about the quality of care for their adopted daughter—but were mostly concerned about the wellbeing of the staff and carers who looked after their daughter, and about the lack of payment for overnight working, the low pay and the insecure nature of the work. As we look ahead to the Green Paper on social care, I wish to take the opportunity to underline on the Floor of the House how fundamental those who work in the sector are to the care that these vulnerable families need. If we do not look after them, we cannot expect the families to get the kind of care that they deserve.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made a point about young carers, the voices of whom all too often just are not heard. There is a fantastic charity in Redcar called the Junction Foundation. It is my charity of the year and does an amazing job of supporting young people who are trying to manage the care of members of their families and who are, in a sense, losing some of their childhood in doing so. I do not know what would happen if charities such as the Junction Foundation were not there, because these are people who are falling through the cracks in state provision. I pay tribute to all the charities and state organisations out there that support young people.

I wish to focus briefly on what respite care means to some of the people in my constituency. Facilities such as Bankfields Court in Eston in my constituency are hugely beneficial to the quality of life for the people with learning disabilities and other complex needs who directly access their support. They are also a valuable lifeline to family members who work 24/7 caring for their loved ones. It is difficult for any of us to imagine what it would be like to have to care for a family member 24/7 who has very high levels of need and to have to work through incredibly complex care packages and care plans, often for years—even decades—to support the family member. They do that out of love. We pay tribute to them and owe it to them to make sure that state provision supports them.

The feedback from the “Transforming care” consultation was very worrying. There is overwhelming support for the continuation of bed-based respite care. In fact, consultees in my own borough of Redcar and Cleveland back that option by 96%, so it is overwhelmingly clear that people want to make sure that bed-based respite care continues to be available.

One constituent who contacted me about the proposals is extremely concerned about the support available for her 50-year-old son who has been attending Bankfields Court for the past 30 years. He requires nursing care and she is concerned about how he will cope if the service provided to support him is cut. The reliability and consistency of care provided by centres such as these is one of the most important reasons that they are preferred so much by disabled people and their families. They are particularly important for individuals for whom routine and structure are a necessity. The biggest issue around this is that the insecurity and disruption have a huge knock-on effect on people's lives.

The continued availability of bed-based services at Bankfields and Aysgarth is preferable, of course, to none at all, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North said, but the reality is that these services are still going to be cut back. A cap on spending on respite care by the local CCG will inevitably restrict the services on offer. There will either be fewer nights of care or fewer people. That is a choice that we just do not want to be in a position to have to make. However, if someone has a presenting need for care, the CCG will still have to provide it, regardless of the funding restraints. Where will that care be commissioned? Does that then mean that more cuts will be made elsewhere to compensate?

At the heart of this issue is the funding cuts that local NHS services are being forced to make by central Government. Respite care services across the country are seen, I am afraid, as low-hanging fruit by many local NHS trusts and CCGs, which are having to save money. This is a short-term approach, which we know will only cost more in the long run and will have a devastating impact on many of the most vulnerable people in our society.

I was surprised to read about one case in Hertfordshire, where cuts of £600,000 to respite services for children with complex needs have been proposed. The High Court has now ruled against this twice after legal challenges. I understand that, on Teesside, the scrutiny committees for adult services are discussing whether to formally raise the issue with the Secretary of State, and I sincerely hope that they do. That is a sign of how strongly they feel. Respite care is an important part of our social care system, which is already extremely reliant on hundreds of thousands of unpaid family carers across the UK who give up their lives to provide care. Cutting these services will place even more pressure on those trying to do right by their loved ones.

9.11 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) for raising his concerns this evening, and indeed to his colleagues, the hon. Members for Stockton South (Dr Williams) and for Redcar (Anna Turley). They have stated the justifiable concerns of their constituents powerfully and articulately. Whenever change is afoot, people have a tendency to feel concerned, and it is absolutely right that those concerns are articulated.

[Caroline Dinenage]

Supporting the most vulnerable in our society—those with complex needs, those with autism and those with learning disabilities—is one of the most important but exacting tasks that health and social care commissioners face. It is a task that must be undertaken with a genuine desire to get the very best outcomes not only for those who need support, but for those who care for them.

It is important to remember that many of the services that we are discussing today are focused on people with autism and learning disabilities—conditions that can manifest with very different requirements. They may need care and help ranging from routine, occasional help in the home to full-time personal support, with perhaps two or more people at a time providing that personal assistance.

Our mandate to NHS England includes a clear objective to improve outcomes for people with autism or learning disabilities. That means making sure that they are fully supported in the community, that hospital admissions are reduced and that they have the opportunity to live an ordinary life. Building the right support is our plan to use concerted local action to deliver that community support and to reduce the number of in-patients by March 2019.

We know that respite services are extremely important and a significant element of community-based support. They benefit not only the individual receiving that care, but their family and carers. Members have spoken very powerfully about that tonight. The hon. Member for Stockton North rightly points out that family carers in particular play an invaluable role—a role that is often unsung and undervalued. Often, they do so not out of a sense of duty or compassion, but out of pure love, and they deserve nothing other than our unbridled respect and our thanks. He asked me about the work that we are doing to support carers. They will of course be an integral part of our thinking in the Government Green Paper on social care that will be produced later in the year. In the interim period, we have a carers' action plan, which I care passionately about and which will set out some short-term steps that we want to introduce to support carers and their valuable work more fully.

Alex Cunningham: It is very clear that the Minister gets this, and I admire the way in which she is putting her argument across, but this is also about resource. I am very concerned about the current problem on Teesside, but in the longer term young people in their 20s are coming through the system and approaching 30. These are children who in a previous generation would never have survived, and they are going to need more and more services. More children are becoming adults who will require more provision. What are the Government doing in terms of longer-term planning?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Gentleman articulates a real issue with which we have to contend. That is why we have increased NHS spending every single year since 2010, so that our NHS now has about £13 billion more to spend on caring for people than it had in 2010. That goes to the heart of the issue that he has identified. We need to ensure that care, particularly respite care, is responsive to the needs of individuals. That implies both a need to assess and determine the right kind of support, and a need for flexibility to allow for personal choice, as I believe is being looked at in Teesside.

Some needs may be best met through a stay in a suitable service that provides overnight beds, with appropriately trained staff to support people's individual care needs, but that may not be true for everybody. Those with less severe physical or learning disabilities may find that action in the community is more desirable and appropriate for them—for example a visit, leisure activity or even visiting family members with the right personal support. We do not want those opportunities to be written off for them because we have a very restrictive system, which is why it is right that commissioners have the means to seek new approaches and to be flexible in how they meet people's needs. I understand that the intention in North Tees is exactly that, but it must be based on suitable engagement, as the hon. Gentleman said, to assess people's individual needs.

Having listened to hon. Members' comments, I understand their concern that not everyone can currently access respite services and that these services may not be flexible enough. Local commissioners are rightly looking to change respite provision. The hon. Gentleman will understand that it is not customary for a Minister to comment in detail on specific commissioning decisions or on the extent to which there was appropriate consultation, unless that is part of a formal review process. I understand that the local CCG has consulted on the proposals for 10 weeks and is now in the process of designing the service.

Alex Cunningham: Does the Minister recognise that the CCG has acknowledged that it will have to get more people into the system, so the service will be diluted? Having recognised that, what can she do about it?

Caroline Dinenage: As I have already said, it is up to CCGs to commission the local services that they feel are appropriate in their local communities. It is not for the Government to force a top-down diktat on how they need to spend their resources. I understand that local councils are, quite rightly, scrutinising the proposals right now. This is an important means of quality assurance and is informed by local people with local knowledge. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will find some reassurance in that. However, although it is right that service reconfigurations are considered locally and are not driven from the top down, any significant changes to services are subject to the Government's four tests. The changes should demonstrate support from clinical commissioners, strengthened public and patient engagement, clarity on the clinical evidence base, and support for patient choice.

There is a clear set of expectations in relation to the provision of respite care and the role of commissioners. Alongside provisions in the National Health Service Act 2006, all CCGs must secure services to meet the needs of their population to a reasonable extent. Respite care may be routinely commissioned or made available as part of a package of NHS continuing healthcare, and is often also provided as part of social care. The Care Act 2014 requires that where an adult or carer appears to have care and support needs, the local authority must carry out an assessment and meet any need where the person has met the eligibility criteria.

Alex Cunningham: The scrutiny groups on Teesside—at least some of them—are thinking of referring the matter to the Secretary of State. What happens when it is referred, and what can the Government do then?

Caroline Dinanage: That will of course be a matter for the Secretary of State, who will deal with it in the appropriate way.

The Care Act also requires local authorities to take a preventive approach to addressing people's needs in taking steps to intervene early to prevent or delay any worsening of an adult's need for care and support. This would of course include the carers about whom the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues care so passionately. It is really important to allow carers to take the respite that we have spoken about.

The hon. Gentleman might be interested to know that the Autism Act 2009 requires the Government to have a regularly reviewed autism strategy and to issue guidance to local authorities, NHS bodies, and foundation trusts. In addition, the Children and Families Act 2014 introduced a new statutory framework for children with special educational needs and disabilities. This gives commissioners very clear responsibilities towards those with learning disabilities and autism, including those who may be affected by the review on Teesside.

Jim Shannon: I think that everyone in this Chamber will have a knowledge of autism. The Minister will be aware that we have an excellent autism strategy in Northern Ireland, and there is also a very good strategy in Wales. Has she had a chance to check out both those strategies in order perhaps to introduce them, in full, to England?

Caroline Dinanage: I have not, but now that the hon. Gentleman has recommended that to me, I will certainly look into it.

It is really important that commissioners have the prerogative to make a local determination of what constitutes the right services. We have set clear expectations for how health and social care meets people's need for support and families' and carers' needs for respite. We can close the gap between the outcomes for those who are most vulnerable and those without complex needs, but it has to be via a combination of setting national expectations alongside a local approach to delivering the necessary services. The NHS has a responsibility to ensure that people have access to the best and safest healthcare possible. This means that it must plan ahead and look at how best to secure safe and sustainable NHS healthcare provision, and provide flexible approaches to meet the widest range of needs.

That is what we hope to see in action in Teesside. I understand that any change to local services for vulnerable people must be viewed with a degree of apprehension. However, considering the assurances given locally by commissioners, the process they have undertaken, and the overall aim of providing a more flexible set of options for respite care that moves away from a very medical model, I am hopeful that these changes will be of benefit to the people who most need these services.

Question put and agreed to.

9.23 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 12 March 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Competitiveness Council

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): The Competitiveness Council (Internal Market and Industry) will take place on 12 March in Brussels. Day two on research and space has been cancelled.

The Council will hold an exchange of views on the European semester 2018: Digitalisation of the EU economy. The Council will discuss industrial policy and will look to agree upon a set of conclusions on a future EU industrial policy strategy for competitiveness, growth and innovation. There will then be a discussion to mark the 25th anniversary of the single market. Finally, there will be a ‘competitiveness check-up’ discussion which I expect to focus on the externalities of regulation in services on manufacturing.

The Council will discuss a number of AOB points on the Industry 2030 roundtable and the plastic strategy, both presented by the Commission. The Council will end with a point on better regulation presented by the presidency.

[HCWS528]

TREASURY

ECOFIN

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): A meeting of The Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Brussels on 13 March 2018. EU Finance Ministers will discuss the following:

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President will brief the Council on the outcomes of the 12 March meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission will provide an update on the current economic situation in the EU.

Mandatory disclosure rules

The Council will be invited to reach political agreement on the Council directive regarding the mandatory automatic exchange of information in the field of taxation in relation to reportable cross-border arrangements.

Banking package

The Council will be invited to agree on a general approach on the legislative proposals included in the Banking package (Capital Requirements Regulation (CRR) and Directive (CRD), Single Resolution Mechanism Regulation (SRMR), and the Bank Recovery and Resolution Directive (BRRD)).

Current financial services legislative proposals

The Bulgarian presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services and the Commission will present its most recent capital markets union package.

European semester 2018

Following a presentation by the Commission on its 2018 country reports, the Council will hold an exchange of views on the implementation of country-specific recommendations with a focus on productivity growth. The Council will also be requested to adopt the conclusions on the European Court of Auditors special report on the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure (MIP).

G20 meeting

The Council will be invited to approve the EU terms of reference for the G20 meeting on 19-20 March in Buenos Aires.

Status of the implementation of financial services legislation

The Commission will inform the Council on the status of the implementation of financial services legislation.

[HCWS536]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

UK-Gibraltar Relationship

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I chaired the sixth meeting of the UK-Gibraltar Joint Ministerial Council (Gibraltar EU Negotiations) on Thursday 8 March. We agreed a series of measures that will ensure that the valued and historic links between the UK and Gibraltar grow, deepen and endure.

The UK will guarantee Gibraltar financial services firms’ access to UK markets as now until 2020. Ahead of this, the UK Government will work closely with the Government of Gibraltar to design a replacement framework to endure beyond 2020 similarly based on shared, high standards of regulation, and enforcement of this regulation, and underpinned by modern arrangements for information-sharing, transparency and regulatory co-operation.

The UK and Gibraltar have agreed to recognise the importance of enhancing our liaison on all of the environmental and fisheries implications of EU exit that are relevant to Gibraltar, whether by sharing information as openly as possible, by providing specialist expertise across a range of policy areas to support Gibraltar with its own preparations, or by considering with Gibraltar where its interests might be promoted in future through regional or international agreements.

The UK has provided assurance to the Government of Gibraltar that, following EU exit, British citizens resident in Gibraltar will continue to be eligible for higher education home fee status at English institutions (both during the implementation period and afterwards) subject to concluding a reciprocal agreement for UK students studying at higher education institutions in Gibraltar.

The UK has provided assurance that gambling operators based in Gibraltar will continue to access the UK market after we leave the EU in the same way they do now—and we are working towards agreement of a MOU which will enable closer working and collaboration between gambling regulators in Gibraltar and the UK.

The UK is committed to work closely with the Government of Gibraltar towards transport arrangements post EU exit that support Gibraltar’s prosperity.

The UK will maintain the current reciprocal healthcare arrangement between the UK and Gibraltar. This means that Gibraltar can continue to refer an unlimited number of their patients to the UK for free elective treatment. The UK remains committed to fully involving Gibraltar as we leave the EU. We will continue to work together through the JMC process to ensure we take account of Gibraltar's priorities in our negotiations with the EU.

[HCWS531]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Opposition Day Debate: Refugees and Human Rights

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): Her Majesty's Government welcomed the heartfelt and well-informed debate on this highly topical subject on 24 January 2017, and therefore did not oppose the motion.

Human rights are at the very heart of the UK's foreign policy. These rights, as set out in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are interrelated, interdependent and indivisible. These rights apply equally to all humankind. Her Majesty's Government will continue to champion these rights across the globe. This is the right thing to do, legally, ethically and morally. It is also in the nation's interest: full respect for human rights is a key requisite for free, prosperous and secure societies.

The UK supports a co-ordinated and comprehensive approach in meeting the challenges of unmanaged migration, working with our European and other partners. That means addressing the drivers of migration as well as their consequences, targeting the organised immigration crime groups which facilitate movement into Europe, and helping to provide assistance and opportunities for migrants to stay closer to home.

Her Majesty's Government believe that promoting respect for all and fighting intolerance and justice helps build inclusion and stable communities. In September the Prime Minister announced a new call to action to combat the heinous crime of modern slavery, which has already attracted over 40 endorsements. The Foreign Secretary has put girls' education at the heart of the diplomatic work of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office: ensuring girls' full access to 12 years of quality education is key to improving stability, reducing conflict and delivering prosperity. We continue to raise concerns regarding attacks on LGBT rights, freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression.

Her Majesty's Government continue to encourage robust international action in dealing with the threats posed by climate change. We are committed to ensuring that the Paris agreement on climate change is implemented effectively, and that global momentum on reducing emissions is maintained. It is also vital that all countries unite to adapt to the changes that have already taken place and to build resilience to the impacts of climate change in those countries most threatened. We have consistently encouraged robust international action on climate security. We are leading by example. The UK has committed a further £5.8 billion in climate finance

between 2016 and 2021, as part of the collective effort to mobilise \$100 billion of climate finance a year from a range of sources.

Her Majesty's Government are also in the forefront of efforts on conflict resolution. For example, when the Foreign Secretary visited Burma in February 2018 he pressed the Government of Burma to put in place the conditions to allow for the safe, voluntary and dignified return of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh, with international oversight, and to insist that the Rohingya should be fully involved in the process. In Syria the United Kingdom has allocated £1.3 billion to meet the needs of refugees and host communities in the region, and we have committed to resettle up to 23,000 of the most vulnerable refugees to the UK. We continue to press all parties to the Libyan conflict to find a sustainable political situation. Elsewhere in Africa, we continue to support some of the most long-term refugee populations, in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia and South Sudan.

Her Majesty's Government will continue to champion the rights of the most vulnerable, working with the international community. Human rights are for all, wherever they may be. The international community has to work together to ensure that these rights are fully respected.

[HCWS533]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Dental Charges

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): Regulations have been laid before Parliament to uplift dental charges in England from 1 April 2018.

Dental charges remain an important contribution to the overall cost of dental services. They have existed in some shape or form since 1951, and are one of the NHS services that can be charged for under the 2006 Act.

We have taken the decision to uplift dental charges for those who can afford it, through a 5% increase this year.

This means that the dental charge payable for a band 1 course of treatment will rise by £1 in 2018-19, from £20.60 to £21.60. The dental charge for a band 2 course of treatment will increase by £2.80 in 2018-19, from £56.30 to £59.10. The charge for a band 3 course of treatment will increase by £12.20 in 2018-19, from £244.30 to £256.50.

The uplift announced today continues with the aim of finding an appropriate balance between the costs paid by service users and those met by the NHS through the contributions of taxpayers. If this uplift was not implemented resource savings from other parts of the NHS would need to be generated to make up the shortfall.

Those who qualify for free dental treatment will remain entirely exempt from charges. Those under the age of 18, those under the age of 19 and in full-time education, pregnant women or those who have had a

baby in the previous 12 months, and those on qualifying low income benefits will not be impacted by these changes.

Even those not entitled to exemption from dental charges, but who are on low incomes, are eligible to receive full or partial help with dental charges through the NHS Low Income Scheme.

This policy will allow us to continue to protect the most vulnerable through exemptions and the NHS low income scheme. We therefore consider that the proposed uplifts in charges are fair and proportionate and will support NHS front line services.

Details of the revised charges for 2018-19 can be found in the table below;

<i>New Charge (£)</i>	<i>Dental Charges</i>
Band 1 course of treatment (this band includes examination, diagnosis (including radiographs), advice on how to prevent future problems, scale and polish if clinically needed, and preventative care (e.g. applications of fluoride varnish or fissure sealant). This band also covers emergency care in a primary care dental practice such as pain relief or a temporary filling).	£21.60
Band 2 course of treatment (this band covers everything listed in band 1, plus any further treatment such as fillings, root canal work or extractions)	£59.10
Band 3 course of treatment (this band covers everything in bands 1 and 2, plus course of treatment including crowns, dentures, bridges and other laboratory work)	£256.50

[HCWS537]

Branded Health Service Medicines

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Lord O'Shaughnessy) has made the following statement:

This statement is to update the House that regulations were laid before Parliament on 9 March 2018 to revise the statutory scheme to control the cost of branded health service medicines. The changes will come into force on 1 April 2018, and are estimated to result in £33 million of savings in the first year. I have also published a response to the consultation and impact assessment which can be viewed on the Parliament website.

Last year the Government consulted on reforms to the statutory scheme to better align the way the statutory scheme and voluntary 2014 pharmaceutical price regulation scheme work, and move towards a more level playing field between companies in the two schemes.

Reforming the statutory scheme will also enable the Department to put more effective pricing and enforcement controls in place, while increasing the levels of savings of health service medicines covered by the scheme.

Having considered the responses to the consultation, the Government are making regulations for a statutory scheme requiring manufacturers and suppliers that come within the scope of the scheme's provisions to pay the Department of Health and Social Care 7.8% of their net sales income received from the supply of health service medicines. A record of the maximum prices that may be charged for the supply of those health service medicines will be published by the Department. The operation of the statutory scheme will be supported by the requirement for manufacturers and suppliers to record and keep information and to provide that information in accordance with the regulations.

Payments received through the scheme will be passed to the NHS in England, with apportionment to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

After consideration, the Government have amended their approach to the classification of companies in the scope of the scheme, to the exemptions from the payments, and have made a number of minor and technical amendments to ensure the new scheme operates as effectively as possible with the minimum administrative burden to companies.

The regulations will apply to the whole of the UK. Medicines pricing is a reserved area with respect to Wales and Scotland and devolved with respect to Northern Ireland. A legislative consent motion (LCM) was sought from the Northern Ireland Assembly during the passage of the Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Act 2017 ("the 2017 Act"). However, the Assembly was dissolved before the motion itself could be passed. With that in mind, the 2017 Act provided for separate commencement in Northern Ireland, on the basis that it was hoped that a restored executive could complete the LCM process before the provisions were commenced. In the light of the ongoing absence of an Executive, however, a point has been reached whereby a decision on whether to commence the provisions cannot be further deferred. The UK Government have therefore decided to proceed with UK-wide implementation. This decision has not been reached lightly. Yet it is clear that not commencing the provision UK-wide would introduce substantial burdens on companies, and further delay would lead to fewer savings being made by health services across the UK. Given those factors, and noting the support the measures commanded from the previous Executive (with a Legislative Consent Motion laid in the Assembly albeit not passed), I assess that now is the right time to move forward with commencement.

I recognise that I made a commitment to the House during passage of the primary legislation that the provisions would not be commenced in Northern Ireland without an LCM in place. However, there has been no Assembly in place to provide an LCM over a period of more than 13 months and, in its absence, there is a clear public interest in seeing these measures proceed, not least because the measures will generate savings of £1.5 million for Northern Ireland in the first year. It is on that basis that I consider we should move forward. When an Executive has been restored I will write to the Northern Ireland Health Minister to confirm that they are content for the commenced 2017 Act to remain in place. I will also continue to consider carefully any further representations from stakeholders in Northern Ireland, while recognising the broad support that these measures have commanded previously.

It is also available online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements>.

[HCWS538]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Policy

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): I am today announcing how I am minded to proceed in response to the locally-led proposals that I have received for improving local government in Buckinghamshire. Currently in the administrative County of Buckinghamshire, there is a two-tier structure of Buckinghamshire County Council and the district councils of Aylesbury Vale, Chiltern, High Wycombe, and South Bucks.

There is broad local consent for change in Buckinghamshire, though there have been two alternative approaches for how precisely it should be configured. In September 2016 and January 2017, I received locally-led

proposals for replacing the current structure, in one case with a single new unitary council and in the other case with two new unitary councils—one for the area of Aylesbury Vale and the other for the remainder of the current county area.

Having carefully considered all the material and representations I have received, I am minded to implement, subject to parliamentary approval and further discussions, the locally-led proposal to replace the existing five councils across Buckinghamshire with a single council for the area.

I am satisfied that this new single council, if established, is likely to improve local government and service delivery in the county, generating savings, increasing financial resilience, facilitating a more strategic and holistic approach to planning and housing challenges, and sustaining good local services. I am also satisfied that across Buckinghamshire as a whole there is a good deal of local support for this new council, and that the area of the council represents a credible geography.

Whereas, I am equally satisfied that establishing two councils for the current county area is unlikely to improve local government in the area, generate significant savings, or provide the capacity to sustain major services or to address planning and housing challenges. I believe the areas of the two councils would not represent a credible geography or clear local identity, and that there is significantly less local support for two councils than for a single council. Accordingly, I am not minded to proceed with the proposal for establishing two councils.

Notwithstanding, I am clear that in relation to establishing a single council further steps are needed to secure local consent amongst the local partners, and I hope this “minded to” announcement will facilitate the necessary discussions to deliver this local agreement.

Before I take my final decision, there is now a period until 25 May 2018 during which those interested may make further representations to me, including that if a proposal is implemented it is with suggested modifications. The final decision would also be subject to parliamentary approval.

[HCWS535]

TRANSPORT

HS2 Update

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I am pleased to inform the House that we have published our consultation response on taking forward the vision of a Crewe hub.

This response signals how our plans will support that vision and allow for the introduction of an additional HS2 service to Stoke-on-Trent.

To enable this, we will amend our plans for HS2 Phase 2A, from Birmingham to Crewe. This includes 400 metre platforms at Crewe, which allow longer HS2 trains to split and join, opening up opportunities to serve more destinations including Stoke-on-Trent and enabling more people to access high-speed, long-distance services.

We also intend to ask the franchise operator, West Coast Partnership, to include a high-speed service to Stoke-on-Trent in its market development and service plans.

A Crewe hub could generate significant opportunities—not only for Crewe, but also for the surrounding region. To fully realise that vision will need central and local government to work together and require future decisions to be taken as part of Phase 2B.

We welcome the progress being made by Cheshire East Council and the local enterprise partnership in identifying how they could invest in the scheme to ensure the benefits are fully realised.

The steps we are taking today will ensure Crewe and Stoke-on-Trent can benefit fully from HS2 and build on the earlier decision to bring the benefits of HS2 to Crewe from 2027, six years earlier than originally planned.

HS2 will become the new backbone of our national rail network. It will increase capacity on our busy railways and improve connections between our biggest cities and regions. It will support our industrial strategy, generating jobs, skills and economic growth to help build an economy that works for all.

[HCWS534]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council will take place on 15 March 2018 in Brussels. I will represent the UK at the Council.

The Council will be invited to conduct a policy debate on The Future of Social Europe Post 2020.

Under an agenda item on the European semester, the Council will be invited to adopt the following documents of the European semester: the Joint Employment Report (JER) and Council conclusions on the Annual Growth Survey (AGS).

The Council will receive a presentation from the Commission on its 2018 country reports on the implementation of country specific recommendations (CSRs) from 2017.

The Council will be invited to endorse the opinion of the Employment Committee (EMCO)’s on the latest biennial assessment of member states’ progress against the non-binding Council recommendation of 2013 on a youth guarantee for tackling youth unemployment.

The Council will be invited to adopt a recommendation for a European framework for quality and effective apprenticeships. The Council will then conduct a policy debate on closing the gender pay gap: contributing to the achievement of the goals of the European social pillar.

Under any other business, the Commission will present information on its awaited social fairness package, the Commission and the President will present information on the tripartite social summit, and the chairs of the EMCO and the Social Protection Committee (SPC) will provide information on their respective 2018 work programmes.

[HCWS529]

Financial Guidance and Claims Bill

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I am placing in the Library of the House the Department's analysis on the

application of Standing Order No. 83L in respect of the Government amendments tabled for Commons Report stage for the Financial Guidance and Claims Bill.

[HCWS528]

Ministerial Corrections

Monday 12 March 2018

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

UK Relations: Saudi Arabia

The following are extracts from an urgent question to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on 7 March 2018.

Sir Vince Cable: Will the Foreign Secretary insist on the ending of the blockade of ports in Yemen, which is contributing to the devastating humanitarian crisis and famine, of which we have heard much in this House?

Alistair Burt: The right hon. Gentleman referred to a blockade. There is no blockade; there are now no restrictions on the ports—the ports are open. There was a restriction from 19 December, following a missile attack on the capital of Yemen by Houthi forces. There is a strong suspicion that weapons were being smuggled into the country. That is why the restrictions were in place. Since 20 December, a total of 50 ships have docked, and the ports are open. [*Official Report, 7 March 2018, Vol. 637, c. 314.*]

Letter of correction from Alistair Burt:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) in the urgent question on 7 March 2018.

The correct response should have been:

Alistair Burt: The right hon. Gentleman referred to a blockade. There is no blockade; **the restrictions on the ports have been eased**—the ports are open. There was a restriction from **6 November**, following a missile attack on the capital of **Saudi Arabia** by Houthi forces. There is a strong suspicion that weapons were being smuggled

into the country. That is why the restrictions were in place. Since 20 December, a total of 50 ships have docked, and the ports are open.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): In the last month there has been huge disruption in access for international aid into Yemen's ports on the Red sea. Given that that is primarily caused by Saudi Arabian blockades, will the Minister ensure that it is brought up with the Crown Prince as a matter of urgency, and that it is a serious objective of the UK Government to reopen those ports and allow access for humanitarian aid to the 22 million people in need of urgent assistance?

Alistair Burt: I can give the hon. Gentleman the assurance that I gave the House a moment ago. The restrictions were imposed because of the Saudis' quite legitimate concerns that weapons, or weapons parts, that are directed against them are smuggled into Yemen. We wanted to give the assurance that we would do all we could to try to prevent that, and that in the process the restrictions on ships coming in could be eased. We have seen an easing of those restrictions. The ports are now open. Fifty ships have docked since the restrictions were imposed in December, and we shall do all we can. [*Official Report, 7 March 2018, Vol. 637, c. 323.*]

Letter of correction from Alistair Burt:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) in the urgent question on 7 March 2018.

The correct response should have been:

Alistair Burt: I can give the hon. Gentleman the assurance that I gave the House a moment ago. The restrictions were imposed because of the Saudis' quite legitimate concerns that weapons, or weapons parts, that are directed against them are smuggled into Yemen. We wanted to give the assurance that we would do all we could to try to prevent that, and that in the process the restrictions on ships coming in could be eased. We have seen an easing of those restrictions. The ports are now open. Fifty ships have docked since the **restrictions were eased** in December, and we shall do all we can.

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