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13 March 2018**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 13 March 2018

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Marine Energy

1. **Albert Owen** (Ynys Môn) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the place of marine energy in the industrial strategy; and if he will make a statement. [904324]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): My ministerial colleagues and I have regular discussions with our counterparts in the Welsh Government on all aspects of the industrial strategy. Last week, my officials were in Cardiff to discuss with the Welsh Government the proposed Swansea bay tidal lagoon.

Albert Owen: At the heart of the industrial strategy is spreading prosperity across the whole of the United Kingdom, and working with devolved Administrations in our nations and regions will help to achieve that. The Welsh Government are working with practical developers—Minesto, an international company, and local company Morlais—to develop marine energy in my part of the world. The Secretary of State mentioned the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. Will he now make a decision and work with the Welsh Government and with developers so that we can roll that out, maximise our potential, and spread prosperity in this part of the United Kingdom?

Greg Clark: I share the hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm for green energy, as he knows, and I am proud of our achievements. Since 2010, we have quadrupled the proportion of our electricity that comes from renewable sources. However, as the hon. Gentleman understands from being on the Select Committee, we also have a responsibility to minimise the impact on consumers' bills. The Swansea proposal was very much more expensive—more than twice as expensive—as the Hinkley nuclear power station, for example. As I said, though, we are in discussions with our colleagues in the Welsh Government. I do not want to close the door on something if it is possible to find a way to justify it as being affordable to consumers.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I, too, say to the Minister that making a decision on the Swansea bay tidal lagoon is important for Wales as a whole. There is huge potential for future lagoons around Newport following the Swansea pathfinder. It is really important that we do not pass up these opportunities.

Greg Clark: I take the hon. Lady's point. I think that everyone recognises these issues. In fact, the First Minister wrote to me yesterday and acknowledged the

“genuine challenges in...considering a proposal involving untried technology with high capital costs and significant uncertainties.”

That is why the best way to do this is to explore all the possibilities and to recognise the constraints. That is what I have committed to with colleagues in the Welsh Government.

Smart Meters

2. **Lee Rowley** (North East Derbyshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the level of consumer satisfaction with smart meters. [904325]

20. **Bill Grant** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the effect of smart meters on consumer energy behaviour. [904343]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): Government research on consumer satisfaction published in August last year shows that satisfaction with smart meters is high. Eighty per cent. of consumers are satisfied with their smart meters and 80% would recommend them to friends and family. Smart Energy GB found that nearly 90% of people with a smart meter made energy savings and changed their behavioural patterns.

Lee Rowley: I thank the Minister for his response. It is good to hear that so many people are reaping the benefits from smart meters. No system is ever perfect, however, and that is the case for a small number of customers such as a club in my constituency, Killamarsh juniors athletics club, which is now on its third smart meter and is getting really unhelpful responses from its electricity provider. Can he provide any advice to the club in my constituency?

Richard Harrington: My hon. Friend has made a point about the Killamarsh juniors club in his constituency. I would be very happy to meet him on that specifically. However, I have not found this generally to be the case. The roll-out of smart meters is a very important national modernisation programme that brings major benefits to consumers generally and to his constituents specifically.

Bill Grant: Smart meters are good for consumers and suppliers alike, but the roll-out relies on there being a good mobile phone signal for them to be effective, and in many parts of rural Scotland that is simply not the case. Can the Minister reassure me that he is working across the Government and with relevant stakeholders to ensure that residents in rural areas benefit from smart meters?

Richard Harrington: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. We are working on that, and the Arqiva radio solution provides communications services for the north region. That covers Scotland, and it is contracted to cover nearly 100% of premises by the end of 2020.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that his statistics are based on surveys that are carried out about 10 weeks after installation? My own survey found that 54% of constituents would

currently refuse a smart meter, 97% want to see the costs of the programme shown on their bills, and 74% said that receiving one had not yet made any difference to the size of their bills. Will he also take those findings into account?

Richard Harrington: The hon. Gentleman knows me well enough to know that I am very interested in anything he has to say. He contributed a lot to the passage of the Smart Meters Bill in the House of Commons. I would be very interested to receive those statistics, but we do receive them from quite a few different places, and I do not just quote one sample.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I am sure the Minister is speaking in good faith, but I have come across constituents who find that bills are not reducing, but increasing. Has he had discussions with the utility companies about keeping an eye on this and making sure that the effect of smart meters is to reduce costs for constituents, many of whom are poor, not raise them?

Richard Harrington: I am very surprised to hear what the hon. Gentleman says. As he said—I am grateful for it—I am talking in good faith; I know he is too. I would be pleased to hear of those examples, but I cannot quite understand why bills would go up, because nearly 90% of people with smart meters say that it is changing their energy patterns and that bills are going down.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Can the Minister update us on where we are with the roll-out of SMETS 2 smart meters?

Richard Harrington: As my hon. Friend, who also contributed a lot to the passage of the Bill, knows, SMETS 2 is the newer type of meter which at the moment is in its trial phase. As the months go on, SMETS 1 meters will be converted through software that is being developed by the Data Communications Company, and all new meters will be SMETS 2.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): How satisfied are consumers when they realise that a smart meter becomes a dumb meter when they switch suppliers? Can he put an accurate timeline on the roll-out of SMETS 2 meters?

Richard Harrington: As I explained, the software that is being developed now and will be in place shortly after the summer will ensure that that does not happen. The comparatively small number of SMETS 1 meters that do not operate as smart meters when suppliers change will suddenly become compliant, and they will all be able to speak to one another electronically, which is what we all want.

Carbon Reduction Targets

3. **Anna McMorris** (Cardiff North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the UK's ability to meet its carbon reduction targets. [904326]

7. **Teresa Pearce** (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the UK's ability to meet its carbon reduction targets. [904330]

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): We should all be proud of the progress the UK has made in meeting its carbon reduction targets. The current statistics show that we have met our first budget, are on track to exceed our second and third budgets and are 97% and 95% of where we need to be to meet our fourth and fifth budgets—[*Interruption.*] I hear groaning, but I think those are decent numbers, given that we are 10 and 15 years away from achieving those budgets.

Anna McMorris: The lack of commitment, focus and ambition from this Tory Government mean that we are set to miss our legally binding carbon targets. Three easy wins could be to repeal the ban on onshore wind, prioritise energy efficiency measures and zero-carbon homes and commit to the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. When are this Government going to get their act together, demonstrate their commitment to future generations and get on with it?

Claire Perry: I think the hon. Lady perhaps wrote that before hearing my answer. Let me share two facts with her. First, Britain has led the world in decarbonising our economy while growing it at the same time, not delivering carbon cuts with recessions, as other parties would like. Secondly, there are two countries in the world considered to be doing enough to meet even a 2° C target, and those are China and the UK. We have set out what has been described as the most ambitious set of policies and proposals ever seen from a Government in the clean growth strategy. We are bringing that forward, and it would be nice to feel we had a cross-party consensus on doing something that is so vital for both this country's future and the future of the world.

Teresa Pearce: I was interested to hear the Minister say that we are on target for three carbon budgets but will miss the fourth. The Committee on Climate Change said that the fourth carbon budget will not be met unless policies are supplemented by "more challenging measures". She spoke about ambition. Can she tell us what those challenging measures will be?

Claire Perry: As I answered before, the calculations for the fourth and fifth carbon budgets—which, I repeat, end in 10 and 15 years' time and which we are 97% and 95% of the way to meeting—are based on an analysis of only 30% of the policies and proposals in the clean growth strategy. [*Interruption.*] My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State says he thinks that that is quite good; I agree.

We are bringing forward further work on those policies and proposals and also spending an unprecedented amount on research and development in this space—more than £2.5 billion over this Parliament. I am extremely confident that we will meet our budgets, with our ambitious policy, the ingenuity of British businesses and the science base, the strong campaigning and the structure of the Climate Change Act 2008—the Act that we were the first country in the world to pass.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Does the Minister agree that improving home energy efficiency measures would help us to meet our carbon budgets?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend led an excellent debate on this in Westminster Hall, where we had a very strong outbreak of cross-party consensus. I entirely agree, and

that is why we have set our home efficiency targets at band C for 2035. We are keen to do that in a cost-effective way, and I will shortly be bringing forward the consultation on ECO—the energy company obligation—and how to target it at fuel-poor households. In addition, we need to create a route to market for some of our best British technology to solve that problem.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Nuclear power will clearly be central to us reaching our carbon targets. Is the Minister confident that enough progress is being made to see the construction of nuclear plants in Anglesey and Cumbria?

Claire Perry: As the hon. Gentleman knows, making these long-term decisions and creating costs for consumers over decades—whether in tidal lagoons or in nuclear—are matters that we have to take extremely seriously. We have to reduce the carbon emissions of our power supply, cut costs for consumers and create innovation that we can export around the world, and all of those considerations are being taken into account.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): To meet carbon reduction targets, the Government will need to support, among other technology, offshore wind projects. In Scottish waters, Dounreay Tri, Kincardine and Forthwind are working to deliver first generation projects with an immediate value of £200 million for jobs and the supply chain, yet due to factors outwith their control, they will struggle to hit the UK Government's October deadline. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we might support these projects in making their contribution to carbon reduction?

Claire Perry: We have worked very hard on the wind industry in Scotland—the hon. Gentleman and I both welcome the recent announcement about remote island wind, which is a really positive step forward—but the challenge is that the phasing out of the renewables obligations was set over four years ago. People have been fully aware of them, and we are currently not intending to extend the length of the grace periods. However, as he knows, I am always happy to try to build cross-party consensus on this vital agenda for this country.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I am sure it is absolutely not the intention of the Minister to mislead the House in any way, but her statements about our being 96% of our way towards meeting our fourth and fifth carbon budgets need to be put in the context of the fact that we are committed to reducing CO₂ emissions by 225 million tonnes, but the Government proposals will reduce the amount by only 116 million tonnes, which is only just over half the requirement between the fourth and fifth carbon budgets. What are the Minister's proposals under the clean growth plan to make sure that we reduce the amount by the outstanding 109 million tonnes?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman is a clever scientific fellow, and he knows that those numbers refer to the baseline numbers of 1990. I would be very happy to sit down with him and go line by line through the carbon budgets and the policy proposals. Again, he and I both need to be absolutely clear that regardless—[*Interruption.*]

There is an awful lot of shouting from the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell), who wants to bring back coal. Regardless of what this and future Governments do, those budgets must be fit for purpose, and we have to be absolutely clear and transparent about how we are going to meet them, and that is exactly what the clean growth strategy has done.

Electric Vehicle Charge Points

4. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to improve electric vehicle charge point infrastructure. [904327]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Britain is building one of the best charge point networks in the world, and our £400 million charging infrastructure investment fund, announced at the Budget, will see thousands more charge points installed across the UK.

Mark Pawsey: Yesterday, the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee visited the London Electric Vehicle Company in my constituency. The Secretary of State will remember opening it a year ago, and it is great that we are now seeing electric taxis on the streets of London. We also went to the Electric Vehicle Experience Centre in Milton Keynes, where we heard concerns about the fact that the lack of compatibility between chargers and connectors is in danger of putting people off buying an electric car. What will the Secretary of State do to encourage the industry to adopt a standard?

Greg Clark: I am delighted that the Committee went to see the electric taxi company. The opening, at which my hon. Friend accompanied me, was a fantastic event. Having such compatibility is a very important matter. The recently introduced Alternative Fuels Infrastructure Regulations 2017 set minimum standards for publicly accessible charge points. In addition, the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill, which is currently before Parliament, will give the Government new powers to regulate these technical standards.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Many supply companies are worried that if there is a high uptake, which I think we would all support, the infrastructure will not be there to support it. It is just not true that electric vehicles do not use a great deal of power, so there are concerns about strain on the system as a whole.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for those comments. Our access to the network is one of the best in the world, especially for fast chargers. He is absolutely right that electric vehicles can contribute to the electricity grid's resilience, because their batteries can store electricity generated by renewables for a time when it is needed, which is very much part of the smart systems plan.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Batteries, of course, are one of the constraints that people consider before buying electric cars, because of their limited range. Does my right hon. Friend therefore welcome the initiative of the Mayor of the West Midlands, along with the Government, for introducing a battery research centre in the west midlands?

Greg Clark: Not a Question Time goes by without me welcoming an initiative from the Mayor of the West Midlands. We have worked very closely with the Mayor, and with the automotive industry, to ensure that we are investing at the cutting edge of research into battery technology, precisely so that we can build the cars of the future.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): What comfort can the Secretary of State give the people of Bristol, who wish to see the number of electric charging points massively increased?

Greg Clark: I am delighted that there is such enthusiasm in Bristol. The hon. Lady will be aware that the funding for charging infrastructure is available especially for city-centre authorities that can put it into public car parks.

Oil and Gas Industry

5. **Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): What progress has been made on a sector deal for the oil and gas industry. [904328]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): The Government remain committed to supporting the industry and building on the £2.3 billion package announced in recent Budgets. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth greatly enjoyed her recent visit to Aberdeen—as did I, when I visited—when the industry presented its initial proposals for a deal. My right hon. Friend is meeting the sector deal champion, Trevor Garlick, tomorrow.

Andrew Bowie: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. The oil and gas industry based in the north-east of Scotland has contributed over £330 billion to the economy, supports over 330,000 jobs across the United Kingdom and has a supply chain worth nearly £30 billion. With an estimated 20 million barrels of oil still to get out of the North sea, the industry has huge potential to drive this country's growth, but of course there is still uncertainty, so I know that the Minister will welcome the response—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but we need a single-sentence question, not a preamble.

Andrew Bowie: Will the Minister pledge to work continually with the industry to develop and deliver the sector deal?

Richard Harrington: Yes.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What discussions has the Minister had with the Treasury about the impact of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs' new end-use procedure changes on the gas and oil industry?

Richard Harrington: I will give a very succinct answer, as you have requested, Mr Speaker. I do not know, but I will happily meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss it.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What consideration is my hon. Friend giving to the downstream sector? Our remaining oil refineries are important national assets and major centres of employment, and they could benefit from clear, long-term thinking.

Richard Harrington: As my right hon. Friend will be aware, the whole sector is important to us, and specifically the supply chain. I have met various players involved, and it is of critical importance to us.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The UK Government have so far failed to announce a sector deal for oil and gas, and there was no mention of one in their industrial strategy. There is a need for a sector deal approach to the industry. The Scottish Government have been calling for such action. Will the Minister finally rectify this glaring omission and commit that vital support for the industry and the jobs and investment it relies on?

Richard Harrington: The hon. Gentleman should be aware that this is a priority for us. We are working very hard with the sector to come up with a sector deal, and I expect those talks to come to fruition very soon.

Electric and Autonomous Vehicles

6. **Mr Ranil Jayawardena** (North East Hampshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the development of electric and autonomous vehicles. [904329]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The automotive sector deal will ensure that the UK continues to reap the benefits from leading the transition to zero-emission and autonomous vehicles. Last month that drew in £33 million of investment into the UK-based connected and autonomous vehicle programmes, with participation from across the industry.

Mr Jayawardena: Jaguar Land Rover recently developed the I-Pace, its first all-electric performance SUV, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) mentioned, the London Electric Vehicle Company has developed the world's first purpose-built electric taxi. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating those great British manufacturers on the world-leading role they are playing in the sector?

Greg Clark: I certainly will. The Jaguar and the London taxi are iconic images, and to see them leading the way into the future is a matter of great delight. I congratulate both companies on choosing to manufacture those vehicles in the UK.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What is the Secretary of State doing to help development in the transition from diesel to electric vehicles? In particular, how is he helping with infrastructure?

Greg Clark: We are working very closely with the industry to ensure that as it develops the new technologies of the future, it is able to plan a smooth transition to a world in which all vehicles will be compatible with our climate objectives.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): All the new electric vehicles will need batteries, of which lithium is an essential element. Recent discoveries of large deposits of lithium in Cornwall open up the possibility of the UK securing a domestic supply for this vital element. What support can the Secretary of State give to this exciting new emerging sector?

Greg Clark: Through our industrial strategy, we have highlighted the potential for new developments in battery storage. If Cornwall can supply the lithium to power that new industry then I am delighted to hear it. I will discuss the possibilities further with my hon. Friend.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): At yesterday's Select Committee visit, mentioned by the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), it became very apparent that the market for electric vehicles is maturing at a much faster rate than many people realise. Is it possible that the ambition of the sector itself is outstripping the ambition of the Government, and should the 2040 target not be brought forward, perhaps even by a decade?

Greg Clark: When it comes to the new generation of automotive technology, the ambition of this Government is not outstripped by anyone. We are working very closely—hand in glove—with the industry, through the Automotive Council, to make sure that we are the best placed in the world not only to research the new technologies, but to manufacture them in this country.

Automotive Sector

9. **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What financial support his Department makes available for manufacturers in the automotive sector. [904332]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The Government's long-term partnership with the automotive industry is an exemplar of our industrial strategy. Only a fortnight ago, I went to Derbyshire to welcome Toyota's decision to build the new Auris in Burnaston, helping to secure 3,000 jobs between Burnaston and Deeside in north Wales.

Justin Madders: I am sure that, while welcoming that investment, the Secretary of State will have been alarmed by the comments made by the chief executive of the PSA Group, which owns Vauxhall in my constituency, about the lack of certainty, with Brexit affecting investment decisions. Will the Secretary of State meet the PSA Group and me to give us confidence in terms of investment in the future of that plant?

Greg Clark: I regularly meet with chief executives of car companies, including Mr Tavares. It is very clear that we are determined, as the Prime Minister set out in her Mansion House speech, to make sure that this very important integrated supply chain is able to continue to operate. It is worth bearing in mind that since my team have been in the Department every single major new model decision has gone our way. I am determined to keep up that advocacy.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): The automotive sector is crucial to UK industry. It employs 814,000 people and we are all proud of British car manufacturers, including the iconic Rolls-Royce

and Jaguar. In recent weeks, however, President Trump has revealed an appetite for a trade war that began with the announcement of steel tariffs and now includes threats to put tariffs on EU cars, which could hit our industry hard. Will the Secretary of State tell this House what he is doing to avoid a trade war with the US? Should such tariffs come into play, what will he do to protect our steel and automotive sector?

Greg Clark: I am sure the hon. Lady was in her place yesterday when the Trade Secretary gave a very comprehensive statement. There was some welcome for the cross-party approach that went into defending the international system of free trade. It does no one any good if we have tariffs in place that impede trade. Her endorsement of the approach being taken by the Trade Secretary would be welcome.

Carillion

10. **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Whether he is taking steps to safeguard the employment of people who were working under private sector Carillion contracts at the time of that company's liquidation. [904333]

19. **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): What steps he has taken to support and engage with businesses affected by the liquidation of Carillion. [904342]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): The official receiver and special manager are working to ensure an orderly transition by facilitating the transfer of contracts. As of 12 March, 8,521 jobs have been safeguarded and 1,536 people have been made redundant, sadly, through the liquidation. My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary has set up a taskforce, bringing together trade associations, bankers and representatives of Government to ensure that we support the Carillion supply chain. The taskforce has delivered a range of supportive measures, including more than £900 million of support from UK lenders.

Gerald Jones: Let me seek some further clarification. If there is any doubt that TUPE applies, can the Government confirm that they will instruct the official receiver to transfer employees on private sector contracts as if TUPE applied? Will the Government also ensure that trade union recognition is transferred with those staff?

Andrew Griffiths: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question and refer him to the recent Westminster Hall debate, when we discussed at some length the legal responsibilities in relation to TUPE, which do not apply in many cases during a liquidation. Transferring employers may well decide to offer terms to transferring employees that recognise existing employment rights, terms and conditions. The Government are focused on ensuring that transferred employees are no worse off, and the official receiver is doing all he can to facilitate this wherever possible.

Alex Chalk: The Carillion collapse has exposed what can only be described as market abuse by lead contractors, with subcontractors in Cheltenham suffering as a result

of the failure to adhere to best practice schemes such as the prompt payment code. What steps are the Government taking to ensure compliance with the schemes and more generally to stamp out market abuse?

Andrew Griffiths: My hon. Friend, who has met me on a number of occasions to defend the interests of businesses in his constituency, will know that the Government had two priorities: to protect the provision of vital public services and to do what we could to protect jobs in Carillion and jobs in the supply chain. We are clear that we must learn the lessons from the collapse of Carillion. This could be a catalyst for change for the good. We are concerned to ensure that we do all we can to learn the lessons on procurement, and we also want to do more to ensure that the supply chain is promptly paid and that small businesses are paid speedily. Looking at the prompt payment code is an important part of that.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Following on from the question from the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), when Carillion went bankrupt, many of the subcontractors had not been paid for 120 days. The money coming to Carillion was from the Government, so what are the Government doing to ensure that when they give contracts to big businesses, those businesses pay their subcontractors on time? Small businesses are the lifeblood of our economy and they have been destroyed by the collapse of Carillion.

Andrew Griffiths: I thank the hon. Lady for that question and particularly for the work that her Select Committee is doing in getting to the bottom of exactly what happened in Carillion. That is very important work. The Government are clear that with public sector contracts we pay in 30 days, and we expect tier 1 contractors to ensure that they pay their supply chain in 30 days too. We are determined to take action to ensure that this happens, and we are looking at what we can do to make sure not only that small businesses in the public sector supply chain get paid within 30 days, but that we do more to support private sector suppliers as well.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What support has been given to British nationals working abroad who were with Carillion?

Andrew Griffiths: The main priority for this Government has been to protect jobs here in the UK and the continuation of public sector contracts and services. The special manager, of course, has a responsibility to wind up the business to get the best value for creditors, but he is responsible for dealing with businesses overseas.

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): For the Carillion workers who were not transferred under TUPE, what was the degradation of their terms?

Andrew Griffiths: I have met the hon. Lady several times, and I know that she is working hard to ensure that her constituents employed by Carillion get all the protections possible. The Secretary of State has had conversations with the special manager to ensure that wherever possible when contracts are transferred employees get like conditions so that they are no worse off. As she

will understand, this is a very complex and complicated business, and I do not at the moment have the specific statistics she requests.

Self-employed People

11. **Andrea Jenkyns** (Morley and Outwood) (Con): What steps he is taking to support self-employed people. [904334]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): We want people to be self-employed when it is the right thing for them, which is why the Government have introduced new measures to ensure they are even better supported. These include improved support for embarking on self-employed careers, encouraging pension saving and supporting people to pay the right tax. From 6 April 2016, we have also given self-employed people the ability to build their entitlement to the new state pension at the same rate as employed people.

Andrea Jenkyns: Morley is lucky to have a thriving high street, which matters to me as an ex-retailer. During the recent cold weather, Apollo Fisheries in Morley handed out free food to cold residents. What are the Government doing to support our businesses on the high street, and will the Minister take this opportunity to congratulate Apollo Fisheries on its fine example of Yorkshire hospitality at its best?

Andrew Griffiths: I think the House will recognise that I am no stranger to a fish supper, and I would like to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Apollo Fisheries on the community spirit it showed. It clearly demonstrates that businesses contribute not just to the economy but to our society. The future high streets forum provides joint business and Government leadership to enable our high streets and town centres to adapt and compete in the face of changing consumer and social trends, but we want to go further, so last week I announced the establishment of the Retail Sector Council, which will bring together leaders in retail to help to develop policies and support for the vital retail sector.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): We all want self-employment to grow, but we also want to crack down on apparent self-employment, where people are forced to become self-employed by exploitative employers who then save on national insurance contributions while putting all the risk of that employment on often vulnerable individuals. What are the Government doing about that?

Andrew Griffiths: I am sure the hon. Lady will be delighted to know that the Government are taking forward the proposals set out by Matthew Taylor. We recognise that employment status—whether workers are employed or self-employed—is key to their getting not only the payments but the protections they deserve. That is why we have embarked on a full consultation with the intention of clarifying the status of workers, giving them extra protections and ensuring that if it looks like work and feels like work, it is work and they are paid properly.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): The Government's response to the Taylor review did virtually nothing to tackle the challenges and insecurity that self-employed people face. Equally poor was the Government's response to the treatment of gig workers.

"Don has died and they should be making changes".

Those were the words of DPD gig worker Don Lane's widow, Ruth. With this in mind and with Matthew Taylor himself last week rating the Government's response to the Taylor review a shocking four out of 10, what score would the Minister give himself?

Andrew Griffiths: Seven weeks in, I think I would give myself 10 out of 10. The hon. Lady quotes Matthew Taylor. He has said quite clearly that this is a complex and complicated matter. He wants us to get the definition of status right, because the rights of thousands of gig workers depend on it. That is why in the passage the hon. lady quotes he also said that when we have finished our consultation, if we deliver what we have promised he would give us seven or eight. I want to go further; I want it to be 10.

Rebecca Long Bailey: Ten out of 10 indeed! The Chancellor today might attempt to laud employment figures as positive news, but he will fail to state that over 3 million people are in insecure work, and, according to a recent report by the Centre for Labour and Social Studies, over a third of all workers do not even earn enough to live. There are also real fears, despite the Prime Minister's assurances, that the quality of work will worsen still, with reports that the Foreign Secretary and other Ministers are pushing for major employment law deregulation. Will the Minister confirm whether his Department is carrying out any work looking at the deregulation of certain employment rights?

Andrew Griffiths: The hon. Lady must have missed the intention behind what the Government were doing with the Matthew Taylor report. Not only are we committed to continuing the existing employment rights and protections, but we are going further and faster than anyone else—further and faster than our European colleagues—to give gig workers and others in vulnerable conditions, such as agency workers, greater protections than ever before. We are not just talking about it; we are protecting those workers.

Small Business Sector

12. **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): What steps he is taking to support growth in the small business sector. [904335]

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): Apologies, Mr Speaker. I was congratulating myself too much!

The Government-owned British Business Bank provides £4 billion to support more than 60,000 UK small and medium-sized enterprises. We plan to unlock more than £20 billion of investment in innovative and high-potential businesses, including a new £2.5 billion investment fund with the British Business Bank. The Small Business Commissioner helps with payment issues, dispute resolution, and the sourcing of advice throughout the UK. Through

the industrial strategy, we are continuing to invest in 38 growth hubs across England, as well as the business support helpline.

Stephen Hammond: Of course I join in the congratulations to the Minister, but he will know that one of the crucial requirements for the success of the small business sector is access to and understanding of finance, and there is considerable evidence that there is currently a knowledge gap in the market. What are the Government doing to address that?

Andrew Griffiths: My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head. We are concerned by reports that businesses, particularly small businesses, are reticent about coming forward to access finance that could help them to invigorate and grow. That is why the British Business Bank produces "The business finance guide", in partnership with the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales and industry bodies. The guide explains the different sources of finance that are available to smaller businesses, and is also published online. The British Business Bank will launch a new digital platform in the spring to raise awareness even further.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Small businesses in Cumbria, particularly those involved in farming and tourism, were integral to the Lake district's gaining world heritage site status last summer, a designation that could lead to a massive increase in the number of visitors to what is already Britain's second-biggest visitor destination. Will the Government back those small businesses with the infrastructure investment that they need in order to cope and to grow? Will they, for instance, electrify the Lakes Line?

Andrew Griffiths: I am delighted to support the small businesses to which the hon. Gentleman has referred. He will be pleased to know that we are boosting infrastructure, including digital infrastructure, with more than £1 billion of public investment, including £176 million for 5G and £200 million for local areas to encourage the roll-out of full-fibre networks. I should also be delighted to meet him to discuss what more we can do for lakeside businesses.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Hitchin and Harpenden, which are both small towns, have a thriving independent retail sector, but in recent months they have reported that things are getting harder for them. Will the Minister reassure me that the Government are doing everything they can to help independent small retailers in thriving market towns?

Andrew Griffiths: As the retail Minister, I recognise the real challenges faced by our high streets and, in particular, by independent businesses. In his spring Budget statement, the Chancellor announced a package of measures for business rate relief, including a £1,000 discount for pubs with rateable values below £100,000, £300 million for local authorities to fund discretionary rate relief, and a cap on rate increases, which means that businesses that lose their small business rate relief will not see their bills increase.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Minister should stop being quite so complacent. Carillion was a signatory to the prompt payment code; Interserve still is. Carillion suppliers were paid on terms of 120 days,

while Interserve subcontractors say that they are being absolutely hammered by late payment. Yesterday the Federation of Small Businesses again highlighted the damage done to growth by late payment. When will Ministers support smaller firms in the public sector supply chain, and enforce the prompt payment code?

Andrew Griffiths: We are certainly not complacent, which was why we set up the trade body group to assess the impact of Carillion. The hon. Gentleman will be delighted to know that yesterday I spoke to Phil King, who runs the prompt payment code, and I will be meeting him later this week to discuss how we can tighten up the code and give it real teeth. We are determined to help small businesses.

Local Enterprise Partnerships

13. **Stephen McPartland** (Stevenage) (Con): What plans he has for the future of local enterprise partnerships. [904336]

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): We remain firmly committed to local enterprise partnerships. As announced in the industrial strategy, we are currently reviewing the roles and responsibilities of LEPs so that they are able to play an important role in developing local industrial strategies and driving growth across the country as we prepare to leave the European Union.

Stephen McPartland: Hertfordshire LEP has been a disaster for Stevenage people. Does the Minister agree that it is shameful that growth deal round 1 money is being used to build new council offices and sell off public sector land for developers to build luxury flats, with less than 10% being affordable homes?

Mr Gyimah: Some £15 million of growth deal round 1 money has already been invested in Stevenage, and that has helped to leverage a commitment of £350 million of private investment into the town. My hon. Friend raises an issue of concern, and I urge him to speak to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to resolve it.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I invite the ministerial team to step out of its bubble by coming to Yorkshire and talking to our local enterprise partnerships to respond to their pessimism that while London and the south might survive post Brexit, the midlands, the north and the regions will be in bitterly disappointed territory?

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Gentleman talks manufacturing down, but manufacturing is doing incredibly well in the north of England. He will also be aware that “place” is one of the five pillars of our industrial strategy, and we are determined to deliver across the country.

Euratom

14. **Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): What assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving Euratom on (a) the economy and (b) scientific research in Oxfordshire. [904337]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): I know that the hon. Lady has a keen interest in this subject, and we have met to discuss the impact on many of her constituents working at the Culham Centre for Fusion Energy. As she knows, our assessment was detailed in the “Nuclear Sector Report” at the end of December last year, and in an impact assessment for the Nuclear Safeguards Bill, which was first published on 18 December. We continue to engage with stakeholders, and the hon. Lady knows that my door is always open if she wishes to discuss this matter further.

Layla Moran: I thank the Minister for his response. We know that the Government are seeking a close association with Euratom, but with just 109 days until Austria takes up the presidency, Oxfordshire needs clarity now to plan for the future. Can the Government categorically say they are seeking an associate agreement, and can they guarantee that they will kick-start the process before 1 July?

Richard Harrington: I can confirm that, as the hon. Lady knows, we are seeking the closest possible association with Euratom. We are working very hard to achieve that objective.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Does the Minister agree that at the recent meeting of the all-party group on nuclear fusion, which I chair, the Government’s attitude to expanding their collaboration in nuclear activity was greatly evident?

Richard Harrington: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. He also has a keen constituency interest in this, and I am very keen to represent the interests of his constituents.

Topical Questions

T1. [904349] **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Since our last questions, Toyota has announced, as I said a few moments ago, that it would build its new model in Derbyshire, with most of the engines coming from the Deeside factory in north Wales. We also published our response to the Taylor review on modern employment practices. A million more vulnerable consumers will be protected by the extension of the Ofgem safeguard tariff cap and, as Members know, the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill has been introduced into Parliament. Yesterday, as part of our industrial strategy, we announced a major £300 million research programme into technologies to serve the ageing population and to ensure that we can benefit from this encouraging global trend.

Mark Menzies: What engagement is the Secretary of State having with a Canadian company called Brookfield, the likely buyer of Springfields nuclear fuels in my constituency, which manufactures nuclear fuel for the UK and provides over 1,200 well-paid jobs?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is a champion of this sector. The Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), has met the vice-

president of Brookfield and expressed our continuing support for Springfields to have a future in providing fuel for plants in this country and overseas.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): GKN was forged in our country's first industrial revolution. It built the tanks used in the D-day landings, and its innovative battery technology will power our future economy. The Government's industrial strategy identifies batteries as a key technology and manufacturing as a priority sector, yet the Secretary of State has nothing to say about the hostile takeover of that great firm. Why is it that all too often, as with Arm and Unilever, his industrial strategy seems to leave great British success stories less great or less British?

Greg Clark: I would have thought that the hon. Lady would have informed herself as to the responsibility of Ministers under the Enterprise Act 2002. That Act, which was passed under the previous Labour Government, states that Ministers can intervene only in mergers that raise public interest concerns on the grounds of national security, financial stability or media plurality. She should know that the Government's corporate governance reforms have ensured that GKN had longer to prepare its defence, preventing the kind of smash and grab raid that Cadbury's was subjected to under the previous Government, and that provision has been made for legally binding undertakings to be given in takeover bids. Those are intended to be used, and I would be surprised and disappointed if any bidder did not make their intentions clear, extensive and legally binding.

T2. [904350] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): Can my hon. Friend assure me that protected status for Cornish produce such as the Cornish pasty will not be compromised post-Brexit?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths): It is said that I am no stranger to the fish supper, and I also have knowledge of the Cornish pasty and, indeed, Cornish clotted cream. All those products will achieve UK geographical indications and will continue to be protected in the UK after our EU exit. As negotiations are ongoing, I cannot give my hon. Friend a cast-iron assurance right now that UK products will remain protected in the EU after exit, but I can categorically state that that is the Government's clear objective.

T5. [904353] **Graham P. Jones** (Hyndburn) (Lab): I am grateful to Carl Webb, my Communication Workers Union regional political officer, for bringing to my attention the BT Sport call centre in my constituency, which is paying the minimum wage to agency workers beyond 12 weeks using the Swedish derogation. The Taylor report talked about getting rid of the Swedish derogation, so when are the Government going to act to protect some of our lowest paid workers?

Andrew Griffiths: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we are acting right now; a consultation is under way with regard to the Swedish derogation. Firms and businesses should be in no doubt that this Government expect everyone to be paid either the national minimum wage or the national living wage. That is why we have doubled the amount of enforcement and protected the pay of 98,000 workers. We are absolutely committed to everybody getting paid the national minimum wage.

T3. [904351] **Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con): Late and non-payment of retention payments in the construction industry is affecting small firms in Moray and across the UK. When will Ministers deal with that issue?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): The Government are determined to improve payment practices, and we understand that retentions have caused problems for contractors in the supply chain. We consulted on the contractual practice of cash retention and we are now considering the responses to assess the extent of the issues and to determine what further intervention is required.

T9. [904357] **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Does the Minister agree that there is overwhelming evidence that migrant workers, including EU nationals, make a hugely positive contribution to business, the economy and our public finances, and that they do not undermine wages?

Greg Clark: I think that we all recognise the extremely positive contribution made by workers from the EU, whether in business or in our public services, and I endorse that.

T4. [904352] **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): According to the tidal energy industry leader Tidal Lagoon Power, Southport is considered to be one of the best locations in the United Kingdom for a tidal lagoon. Will my right hon. Friend therefore meet me to discuss the possibility of bringing tidal energy to Southport?

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): My hon. Friend is, as ever, assiduous in promoting the interests of his constituency, and I would be delighted to meet him. I should point out that the lagoon project in his constituency is currently not part of the proposal being put forward by the company promoting other tidal projects.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The Government raised business rates on rooftop solar schemes by up to 800% last year, and it now appears that on-site battery storage is likely to go the same way. Given that gas combined heat and power has been exempted from business rates, should not the Government do the same for solar and battery storage to support clean energy?

Claire Perry: Our solar capacity has increased by more than 30% in the past two years, so we clearly are bringing forward such schemes. The hon. Gentleman will know that we are looking closely at ways of reducing some of the disincentives, particularly around on-site storage, but I am happy to meet him to discuss things further.

T6. [904354] **Peter Heaton-Jones** (North Devon) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the south-west is a great region in which to do business? Will he join me in recognising the work of the Barnstaple and District chamber of commerce, which I met on Friday, in promoting North Devon as, without doubt, the region's economic powerhouse?

Andrew Griffiths: The south-west is indeed a great region in which to do business. Chambers of commerce including Barnstaple's, which has been serving its community since 1911, have a valuable role to play in supporting local businesses and ensuring that their voice is heard. That is why I have met chambers of commerce 11 times in the seven weeks in which I have been the Minister for small business.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Solar power is the most popular source of clean energy and one of the cheapest, so why has it been excluded from clean power auctions for the past three years? Why oh why does it continue to be excluded, putting the industry at a clear competitive disadvantage?

Claire Perry: We continue to look at ways of bringing forward all forms of renewable energy. Indeed, up to 30% of energy generation in this country now comes from renewables. We have not yet taken decisions about future contract for difference allocation rounds, but we intend to do so.

T7. [904355] **Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con):** The banking scandals at RBS destroyed thousands of businesses, but the owners of those businesses have no means of seeking justice or recompense. Will the Minister support the proposal of the all-party group on fair business banking and finance for redress through an independent tribunal system?

Andrew Griffiths: I pay tribute to the work of the all-party group, of which my hon. Friend is a vice-chair. I met it just last week to explore the options. I share his aim that small businesses should have an accessible and impartial forum through which to seek redress when things go wrong. There is work to be done on how that would be paid for and on whether legislation would be required, but I look forward to seeing the research and to working with him.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The 220 people who work at GKN Aerospace in my constituency produce windshields for military and commercial aircraft, so is that not another indication that the hostile takeover bid raises national security implications? The Secretary of State has the power to intervene under the Enterprise Act 2002.

Greg Clark: As we have met to discuss this matter, the hon. Gentleman knows that I must ensure that I do not prejudice any assessment. I set out to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) the constraints under which I have to operate.

T8. [904356] **Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con):** Last October's "Made Smarter" review set out how manufacturing businesses in East Renfrewshire and across the UK can be transformed through the adoption of industrial digital technology. How will the Government support "Made Smarter" now that it has been announced as a deal in development in the industrial strategy?

Richard Harrington: I have met Juergen Maier, the chief executive of Siemens UK, to discuss that. At a recent dinner, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced a "Made Smarter" commission and

asked Sir Mark Walport to work with Juergen on the development of an industrial strategy challenge for the digitisation of our manufacturing industry.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The number of electric vehicles on our roads is likely to increase significantly over the next few years. What work is being done to ensure that charging points are more frequently powered by renewable sources over that period?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. Part of our industrial strategy is about bringing together the energy and automotive sectors, so that one reinforces the other. That is the Faraday challenge, which is attracting so much attention in both industries.

T10. [904358] **Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con):** Given our close defence and trading relationship with the United States, will the Minister reassure the House that he is making efforts to secure an exemption for UK-produced steel and aluminium products from next week's imposition of tariffs?

Richard Harrington: I was in Brussels yesterday to meet other European Union Ministers, trade union leaders and representatives of employers to ensure that we do exactly that.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee has heard powerful evidence on why the Government should call in the Melrose bid for GKN on national security grounds, and the Secretary of State for Defence has written to the Business Secretary about the matter. Will the Business Secretary use his powers, before it is too late, to protect this great British engineering giant?

Greg Clark: I will look very carefully at the report of the Committee and that will be one of the pieces of evidence that I will seriously consider.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Secretary of State has said that his door is still open to discussions about the benefits of green energy, so will he commit today to seeing Charles Hendry—the author of the Hendry review, which is still awaiting a response from the Government 14 months on—me, as chair of the all-party group on marine energy and tidal lagoons, and representatives of Tidal Lagoon Power and TidalStream?

Claire Perry: It is always a pleasure to respond to my hon. Friend, who is an assiduous campaigner for this form of energy. We continue to commit to supporting our marine energy industry. I refer him to the answer that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State gave at the start of questions. We continue to exchange information with the Welsh Government, and we have to understand what is on offer. We want to reach the right decision on behalf of low-carbon technologies, but also British bill payers and taxpayers.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The county in which I live, Flintshire, has only two electric charging points. Given the earlier exchanges, can the Secretary of State set targets for charging points in rural areas as well as urban ones?

Greg Clark: The right hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. It is true that the charging network needs to extend right across the country if people are to have the confidence that they will be able to recharge their vehicle, and we have the rural aspect very much in mind.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): According to the press, the Secretary of State gave a presentation to a Sub-Committee of the Cabinet about the automotive sector and how important it is that we do not have a hard Brexit. That seems to have persuaded members of the Cabinet who had thought that a hard Brexit might be a good idea that it would, in fact, be a very bad idea

for British business, notably the automotive sector. On that basis, will the Secretary of State make that presentation available to all right hon. and hon. Members?

Greg Clark: It would be wrong of me to disclose conversations that took place in Cabinet—my right hon. Friend understands the requirements of collective responsibility—but it is no secret to anyone in this House that I regard the fact that the success of the automotive sector depends on integrated supply chains as good evidence of what type of trade agreement is needed. That was highlighted in the excellent speech made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister at the Mansion House.

Spring Statement

12.32 pm

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):

I am pleased to introduce to the House the first spring statement. The UK was the only major economy to make hundreds of tax and spending changes twice a year, and major international organisations and UK professional bodies alike have been pressing for change. In 2016, I took the decision to move to a single fiscal event in the autumn, giving greater certainty to families and businesses ahead of the new financial year and allowing more time for stakeholder and parliamentary engagement on potential fiscal changes.

Today's statement will update the House on the economic and fiscal position, report progress on announcements made at the two Budgets last year and launch further consultations ahead of Budget 2018, as I set out today in my written ministerial statement. I will not be producing a Red Book today, but of course I cannot speak for the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell).

I am pleased to report today to the House on a UK economy that has grown in every year since 2010—an economy that, under Conservative leadership, now has a manufacturing sector enjoying its longest unbroken run of growth for 50 years, that has added 3 million jobs and seen every single region of the UK with higher employment and lower unemployment than in 2010, that has seen the wages of the lowest-paid up by almost 7% above inflation since April 2015 and that has seen income inequality lower than at any time under the last Labour Government. That is solid progress towards building an economy that works for everyone.

So I reject the Labour party's doom and gloom about the state of the nation. Every Wednesday, we have to listen to the Leader of the Opposition relentlessly talking Britain down, and every year since 2010 we have had to listen to the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington predict a recession—none of which has actually happened. So if there are any Eeyores in the Chamber, they are on the Opposition Benches; I, meanwhile, am at my most positively Tigger-like today, as I contemplate a country that faces the future with unique strengths: our language is the global language of business; our legal system is the jurisdiction of choice for commerce; we host the world's most global city and its international finance and professional services capital; our companies are in the vanguard of the technological revolution, while our world-class universities are delivering the breakthrough discoveries and inventions that are powering it; British culture and talent reaches huge audiences across the globe; and our tech sector is attracting skills and capital from the four corners of the earth, with a new tech business being founded somewhere in the UK every hour, producing world-class products, including apps such as TransferWise, Citymapper and Matt Hancock.

Today, the Office for Budget Responsibility delivers its second report for the fiscal year 2017-18, and I thank Robert Chote and his team for their work. It forecasts more jobs, rising real wages, declining inflation, a falling deficit and a shrinking debt. The economy grew by 1.7% in 2017, compared with the 1.5% forecast at the Budget, and the OBR has revised up its forecast for 2018 from 1.4% to 1.5%. Forecast growth is then unchanged

at 1.3% in 2019 and 2020, before picking up to 1.4% in 2021 and 1.5% in 2022. That is the OBR's forecast, but forecasts are there to be beaten; as a nation, we did it in 2017, and we should make it our business to do it again.

Our remarkable jobs story is set to continue, with the OBR forecasting more jobs in every year of this Parliament and over 500,000 more people enjoying the security of a regular pay packet by 2022. I am pleased to report that the OBR expects inflation, which is currently above target at 3%, to fall back to target over the next 12 months, meaning that real wage growth is expected to be positive from first quarter of 2018-19 and to increase steadily thereafter.

I reported in the autumn that borrowing was due to fall in every year of the forecast and debt was to fall as a share of GDP from 2018-19. The OBR confirms that today, and further revises down debt and borrowing in every year. Borrowing is now forecast to be £45.2 billion this year. That is £4.7 billion lower than forecast in November and £108 billion lower than in 2010, which, coincidentally, is almost exactly the total cost of the additional spending pledges made by the Labour party since the general election in June last year; it has taken them just nine months to work up a plan to squander the fruits of eight years' hard work by the British people.

As a percentage of GDP, borrowing is forecast to be 2.2% in 2017-18, falling to 1.8% in 2018-19, 1.6% in 2019-20, then 1.3%, 1.1% and finally 0.9% in 2022-23, meaning that in 2018-19 we will run a small current surplus, borrowing only for capital investment. And we are forecast to meet our cyclically adjusted borrowing target in 2020-21 with £15.4 billion of headroom to spare, which is broadly as forecast at the Budget. The more favourable outlook for borrowing means the debt forecast is nearly 1% lower than in November, peaking at 85.6% of GDP in 2017-18 and then falling to 85.5% in 2018-19, then 85.1%, 82.1%, 78.3%, and finally 77.9% in 2022-23.

That is the first sustained fall in debt in 17 years; a turning point in this nation's recovery from the financial crisis of a decade ago; light at the end of the tunnel; another step on the road to rebuilding the public finances that were decimated by the Labour party. And it is one that Labour would again place at risk, because under Labour's policies, our debt would not fall over the next five years; it would rise by more than £350 billion to more than 100% of our GDP, undermining our recovery, threatening investment in British jobs, burdening the next generation and wasting billions and billions of pounds more on debt interest. There is indeed light at the end of the tunnel, but we have to make absolutely sure that it is not the shadow Chancellor's train hurtling out of control in the other direction towards Labour's next economic train wreck.

In autumn 2016, I changed the fiscal rules to give us more flexibility to adopt a balanced approach to repairing the public finances. We are reducing debt not for some ideological reason, but to secure our economy against future shocks, because we in the Conservative party are not so naive as to think that we have abolished the economic cycle, because we want to see taxpayers' money funding our schools and hospitals, not wasted on debt interest, and because we want to give the next generation a fair chance. But I do not agree with those who argue that every available penny must be used to

reduce the deficit; nor do I agree with the fiscal fantasists opposite who argue that every penny should be spent immediately. We will continue to deliver a balanced approach. We are balancing debt reduction against the need for investment in Britain's future, support to hard-working families through lower taxes and our commitment to our public services.

Judge me by my record. *[Interruption.]* We will see whether the Opposition have done their homework; they might be surprised. Since the 2016 autumn statement, I have committed to £60 billion of new spending, shared between long-term investment in Britain's future and support for our public services, with almost £9 billion extra for our NHS and our social care system. There is £4 billion going into the NHS in 2018-19 alone and, as I promised at the autumn Budget, more to come if, as I hope, management and unions reach an agreement on a pay modernisation deal for our nation's nurses and "Agenda for Change" staff, who have worked tirelessly since the autumn, in very challenging circumstances, to provide the NHS care that we all value so highly. There is £2.2 billion more for education and skills and £31 billion to fund infrastructure, research and development and housing, through the national productivity investment fund. That takes public investment in our schools, hospitals and infrastructure in this Parliament to its highest sustained level in 40 years.

At the same time, we have cut taxes for 31 million working people by raising the personal allowance again, in line with our manifesto commitment. We have taken more than 4 million people out of tax altogether since 2010. We are freezing fuel duty for an eighth successive year, taking the saving for a typical car driver to £850, compared with Labour's plans, and raising the national living wage to £7.83 from next month, giving the lowest paid in our society a well-deserved pay rise of more than £2,000 for a full-time worker since 2015.

Since becoming Chancellor, I have provided an extra £11 billion of funding for 2018-19 to help with short-term public spending pressures and to invest in Britain's future. In the longer term, I can confirm that, at this year's Budget, I will set an overall path for public spending for 2020 and beyond, with a detailed spending review to take place in 2019 to allocate funding between Departments. That is how responsible people budget: first, they work out what they can afford; then they decide what their priorities are; and then they allocate between them. If, in the autumn, the public finances continue to reflect the improvements that today's report hints at, then, in accordance with our balanced approach and using the flexibility provided by the fiscal rules, I would have capacity to enable further increases in public spending and investment in the years ahead, while continuing to drive value for money to ensure that not a single penny of precious taxpayers' money is wasted. We are taking a balanced approach—getting our debt down, supporting our public services, investing in our nation's future and keeping taxes low—as we build a Britain fit for the future and an economy that works for everyone.

There is much still to do. Since autumn 2016, we have set out our plan to back the enterprise and ambition of British business and the hard work of the British people. It is a plan to unleash our creators and innovators, our inventors and discoverers, to embrace the new technologies of the future and to deliver the skills that we will need to benefit from them. It is a plan to tackle our long-standing

productivity challenges and to say more loudly than ever that our economy will remain open and outward looking, confident of competing with the best in the world.

We choose to champion those who create the jobs and the wealth on which our prosperity and our public services both depend, not to demonise them. The shadow Chancellor is open about his ideological desire to undermine the market economy, which has driven an unparalleled increase in our living standards over the past 50 years. We on the Conservative Benches reject his approach outright. The market economy embraces talent, creates opportunity and provides jobs for millions and the tax revenues that underpin our public services, so we will go on supporting British businesses. We are reducing business rates by more than £10 billion, and we committed at autumn Budget 2017 to move to triennial revaluations from 2022. Today, I am pleased to announce that we will bring forward the next business rates revaluation to 2021 and move to triennial reviews from that date. We will also launch a call for evidence to understand how best we can help the UK's least productive businesses to learn from, and to catch up with, the most productive, and another on how we can eliminate the continuing scourge of late payments—a key ask from small business. We are the party of small business and the champions of the entrepreneur.

Since the Budget, we have made substantial progress in our negotiations with the European Union to deliver a Brexit that supports British jobs, businesses and prosperity. I look forward—*[Interruption.]* I do not know what the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) does, but I look forward to another important step forward at the European Council next week. We will continue to prepare for all eventualities. Today, my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary is publishing the departmental allocations of over £1.5 billion of Brexit preparation funding for 2018-19, which I announced at the autumn Budget.

Our modern industrial strategy sets out our plan to keep Britain at the forefront of new technologies with the biggest increase in public research and development spending for four decades. Much of this new technology depends on high-speed broadband, and today I can make the first allocations of the £190 million local full-fibre challenge fund announced at the autumn Budget and confirm £25 million for the first 5G testbeds.

As our economy changes, we must ensure that people have the skills they need to seize the opportunities ahead, so we have committed over £500 million a year to T-levels—the most ambitious post-16 reforms in 70 years. From next month, £50 million will be available to help employers to prepare for the roll-out of T-level work placements. Last week the Education Secretary and I chaired the first meeting of the national retraining partnership between the Government, the TUC and the Confederation of British Industry. I can reassure the House that there was no beer and no sandwiches—not even a canapé—but there was a clear and shared commitment to training in order to prepare the British people for a better future ahead. Next month our £29 million construction skills fund will open for bids to fund up to 20 construction skills villages around the country.

The Government are committed to delivering 3 million apprenticeship starts by 2020, with the support of business through the apprenticeship levy, but we recognise the

[Mr Philip Hammond]

challenges that the new system presents to some small businesses looking to employ an apprentice, so I can announce today that my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary will release up to £80 million of funding to support those small businesses in engaging an apprentice. We publish a consultation on improving the way in which the tax system supports self-funded training by employees and the self-employed. Because we currently understand more about the economic payback from investing in our infrastructure than we do about investing in our people, I have asked the Office for National Statistics to work with us on developing a more sophisticated measure of human capital so that future investment can be better targeted.

We are undertaking the largest road building programme since the 1970s. As Transport Secretary in 2011, I gave the green light to fund the new bridge across the River Mersey, and I was delighted to see it open late last year. The largest infrastructure project in Europe, Crossrail, is due to open in just nine months' time. We are making progress on our plans to deliver the Cambridge-Milton Keynes-Oxford corridor. We are devolving powers and budgets to elected mayors across the northern powerhouse and midlands engine. We are in negotiations for city deals with Stirling and Clackmannanshire, Tay cities, borderlands, north Wales, mid Wales and Belfast. Today we invite proposals from cities across England for the £840 million fund that I announced at the Budget to deliver on their local transport priorities as part of our plans to spread growth and opportunity to all parts of this United Kingdom.

At the heart of our plan for building an economy that works for everyone is our commitment to tackle the challenges in our housing market, with an investment programme of £44 billion to raise housing supply to 300,000 a year by the mid-2020s. Today I can update the House. The Housing Minister is working currently with 44 authorities who have bid into the £4.1 billion housing infrastructure fund to unlock homes in areas of high demand. We are concluding housing deals with ambitious authorities that have agreed to deliver above their local housing need. I can announce today that we have just agreed a deal with the West Midlands Combined Authority, which has committed to deliver 215,000 homes by 2030-31, facilitated by a £100 million grant from the land remediation fund. My hon. Friend the Housing Minister will make further announcements over the next few days on the housing infrastructure fund.

We will more than double the size of the housing growth partnership with Lloyds Banking Group to £220 million, providing additional finance for small builders. London will receive an additional £1.7 billion to deliver a further 26,000 affordable homes, including homes for social rent, taking total affordable housing delivery in London to over 116,000 by the end of 2021-22.

My right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) has outlined his initial findings on the gap between planning permissions granted and housing completions in a letter that I have placed in the Library. I look forward to his full report at the Budget. I am delighted to inform the House that an estimated 60,000 first-time buyers have already benefited from

the stamp duty relief that I announced at the autumn Budget. I remind the House that the Labour party voted against this.

In the autumn we published a paper on taxing large digital businesses in the global economy. Today we follow up with a publication that explores potential solutions. I look forward to discussing this issue with G20 Finance Ministers in Buenos Aires at the weekend. We also publish a call for evidence on how online platforms can help their users to pay the right amount of tax, and we will consult on a new VAT collection mechanism for online sales to ensure that the VAT that consumers pay actually reaches the Treasury. We will also call for evidence on how to encourage cashless and digital payments while ensuring that cash remains available for those who need it.

The Government are determined that our generation should leave the natural environment in a better state than we found it and improve the quality of the air that we breathe, so we will publish a call for evidence on whether the use of non-agricultural red diesel tax relief contributes to poor air quality in urban areas. Following our successful intervention to incentivise clean taxis, we will help the Great British white van driver to go green with a consultation on reduced vehicle excise duty rates for the cleanest vans.

We will follow up on the vital issue of plastic littering and the threat to our oceans with a call for evidence to support us in delivering on our vow to tackle this complex issue. It will look at the whole supply chain for single-use plastics, and at alternative materials, reusable options and recycling opportunities. It will look at how the tax system can help to drive the technological progress and behavioural change that we need—as a way not of raising revenue, but of changing behaviour and encouraging innovation. We will commit to investing to develop new, greener products and processes, funded from the revenues raised. As a down payment, we will award £20 million now from existing departmental budgets to businesses and universities in order to stimulate new thinking and rapid solutions in this area during the call for evidence.

We are delivering on our plan with a balanced approach, restoring the public finances, investing in our economy and our public services, raising productivity through our modern industrial strategy, building the homes our people need, tackling the environmental challenges that threaten our future, embracing technological change and seizing the opportunities ahead as we build our vision of a country that works for everyone and an economy where prosperity and opportunity are in reach of all, wherever they live and whatever their gender, colour, creed or background, where talent and hard work alone determine success, as a beacon of enterprise and innovation and an outward-looking, free-trading nation, confident that our best days lie ahead of us, a force for good in the world and a country that we can all be proud to pass on to our children. I commend this statement to the House.

12.58 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I thank the Chancellor for providing me with early sight of his statement, but I have to say that his complacency today is astounding. We face in every public service a

crisis on a scale that we have never seen before. Has he not listened to the doctors, nurses, teachers, police officers, carers and even his own councillors? They are telling him that they cannot wait for the next Budget. They are telling him to act now. For eight years they have been ignored by this Government, and today they have been ignored again.

The Chancellor has proclaimed today that there is light at the end of the tunnel. This shows just how cut off from the real world he is. Last year, growth in our economy was among the lowest in the G7—the slowest since 2012. The OBR has just predicted that we will scrape along the bottom for future years. Wages are lower now, in real terms, than they were in 2010—and they are still falling. According to the Resolution Foundation, the changes to benefits due to come in next month will leave 11 million families worse off—and, as always, the harshest cuts fall on disabled people.

The gap in productivity between this country and the rest of the G7 is almost the widest for a generation. UK industry is 20% to 30% less productive than in other major economies—and why? In part, the reason is that investment by the Government, in real terms, is nearly £18 billion below its 2010 level. This is a Government who cut research and development funding by £1 billion in real terms. Business investment stagnated in the last quarter of 2017. Despite all the promises, the Government continue to fail to address the regional imbalances in investment. London will, again, receive five times more transport investment than Yorkshire and Humberside and the north.

How dare this Government speak on climate change? This is a Government who singlehandedly destroyed the solar industry, with 12,000 jobs lost as a result of subsidy cuts. The Chancellor talks about the fourth industrial revolution, but Britain has the lowest rate of industrial robot use in the OECD. The Government have put £75 million into their artificial intelligence programme—less than a tenth of what the US is spending.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Talking of artificial intelligence!

John McDonnell: The Tory bully boys can shout all they want. They can make—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. There will be a full opportunity for people to contribute, but the right hon. Gentleman must be heard.

John McDonnell: The Tories can shout all they want and they can make their snide remarks, but people out there know about the crisis in our communities.

The Chancellor has made great play this week of reaching a turning point in reducing the deficit and debt. That is a bit rich coming from a party that has put £700 billion on the national debt over the past eight years. It is worth remembering that this is a party that promised us that the deficit would be eliminated completely by 2015 and then 2016. Bizarrely, his predecessor, now ensconced in the *Evening Standard*—or Black Rock, the Washington Speakers Bureau, or whatever number of jobs he now has—has been tweeting about achieving, three years late, a deficit target that he actually abandoned himself.

The reality is that the Chancellor and his predecessor have not tackled the deficit: they have shifted it on to the public services that the Chancellor's colleagues are responsible for. He has shifted it on to the Secretary of State for Health and the shoulders of NHS managers, doctors and nurses throughout the country. NHS trusts will end this financial year £1 billion in deficit. Doctors and nurses are struggling and being asked to do more and more while 100,000 NHS posts go unfilled. Does the Chancellor really believe that the NHS can wait another eight months for the life-saving funds it needs? How many people have to die waiting in an ambulance before he acts? He has mentioned the pay offer to NHS staff that we are expecting shortly. That was forced upon him by campaigns against the pay cap by the Labour party and the trade unions. Taking away a day's holiday from those dedicated staff is mean-spirited. I ask him now: will he drop this miserly act?

The Chancellor has also shifted the deficit on to the Secretary of State for Education and head teachers, with the first per capita cut in schools funding since the 1990s. Today the Government are even trying to deprive 1 million children of a decent school dinner. I am asking the Chancellor, and I am asking every Conservative MP—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The House must calm down. There will be plenty of opportunity for questioning from Members in all parts of the House. The right hon. Gentleman must be heard.

John McDonnell: I am appealing to Tory MPs today, if they are serious about ending austerity, to vote with us this afternoon to give those children the free school meal they are entitled to.

The Chancellor has shifted the deficit on to the Home Secretary and the Justice Secretary. Crime is rising, yet he has cut the number of police officers by 21,500 and the number of firefighters by 8,500, and our prisons and probation service are in dangerous crisis.

In shifting the deficit on to the shoulders of the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, in reality he has shifted the burden on to local councillors—Labour, Lib Dem and Conservative councillors alike. I raise again the stark reality of what that means for the most vulnerable children in our society. There has been a 40% cut in early intervention to support families. The result is the highest number of children taken into care since the 1980s. Children's charities—not us but children's charities—are saying that this crisis could turn into a catastrophe without further funding. Last year, 400 women seeking refuge were turned away because there were no places available for them in refuges. There are now nearly 5,000 of our fellow citizens sleeping rough on our streets—more than double the number in 2010. Tragically, one of our homeless citizens died only feet away from the entrance to Parliament.

The Chancellor mentioned additional housing funding in London. The additional housing funding announced for London today is not a new announcement: this is money already announced. Any new funding is welcome, but it is simply not enough and it represents a cut in London's budgets compared with the money that Labour allocated in 2010. One million vulnerable older people have no access to the social care they need. Conservative

[John McDonnell]

Councils are going bust. Many will be forced to hike up council tax. Councils are running out of reserves, as the National Audit Office explained to us. I ask the Chancellor: will he listen to Conservative council leaders, such as the leader of Surrey, who said:

“We are facing the most difficult financial crisis in our history. The government cannot stand idly by while Rome burns”?

How many more children have to go into care? How many more councils have to go bust? How many more have to run out of reserves before the Chancellor wakes up to this crisis and acts?

Today's statement could have been a genuine turning point but it is, depressingly, another missed opportunity. People know now that austerity was a political choice, not an economic necessity. The Conservatives chose to cut taxes for the super-rich, the corporations and the bankers, and it was paid for by the rest of us in society. They even cut the levy on the bankers in the Finance Bill. We were never “all in this together” as they claimed—never. They cut investment at the very time when we should have been developing the skills and infrastructure needed to raise productivity and grasp the technological revolution with both hands. And when they had a responsibility to meet the challenge of Brexit, we have a Chancellor who this weekend admitted he has not even modelled the Government's options.

Today we have the indefensible spectacle of a Chancellor congratulating himself on marginally improved economic forecasts, while he refuses to lift a finger as councils go bust, the NHS and social care are in crisis, school budgets are cut, homelessness has doubled and wages are falling. This is not a Government preparing our country for the future; it is a Government setting us up to fail.

Mr Hammond: The right hon. Gentleman supported the switch to a single fiscal event, and now he is complaining that I have not delivered a mini Budget today. I am not surprised that he cannot quite understand anybody passing up the opportunity to introduce some new taxes, because that is what a Labour Government would be doing, not once a year or twice a year but every other week.

I heard the right hon. Gentleman referring to some of my hon. Friends as “Tory bully boys”. I remind the House that this is the man who still refuses to apologise to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, so I do not want to hear anything about bullying from the Labour Benches. The public will draw their own conclusions.

The right hon. Gentleman knows his Lenin, of course. The task is to win power, and that is why we see from him the smooth reassuring mien of the bank manager, but every now and again, the mask slips, and we get a glimpse of the sinister ideology that lies beneath—an ideology that would wreck our economy if he ever gets anywhere near the controls, threatening confiscation, dismissing property rights, undermining the cornerstones of our economy and the basis of our freedom and prosperity.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about political choices. Let me tell him the political choices we have made. We have closed the tax gap to one of the lowest in the

developed world. We have raised £175 billion by 100 measures against tax evasion and avoidance. We are collecting 28% of all income tax from the richest 1% in our country—a higher percentage than in any year under Labour. He says that real wages are falling. I have good news for him: the OBR expects real wages to rise from quarter one 2018, which, in case he has not worked out, starts in two weeks' time.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about spending on the disabled. Well, I have good news for him again: spending on the disabled will be higher in every year of this Parliament. He talks about research and development to support our economy. Research and development spending is at a record high.

The right hon. Gentleman reels out the same old bogus statistics on regional distribution; I think he has got the briefing from Russia Today. Let me tell him this: the Infrastructure and Projects Authority has published figures that clearly show that the highest per capita spending on transport infrastructure investment is in the north-west region, not, the last time I checked, one of the southern regions. All regions have benefited from the boom in employment. All regions will end this Parliament with lower unemployment and higher employment.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about £700 billion of increased national debt. We have had to deal with the legacy of Labour's meltdown in 2009 because they did not fix the roof while the sun was shining. Our historical function is to clean up Labour's mess, and my report today shows that we are doing it once again.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about funding for the NHS. I have put £9 billion into the NHS since autumn statement 2016. He talks about school budgets. School budgets are increasing per pupil in real terms. On children's services, he must know that Department for Education research shows that spending on the most vulnerable children has increased by around half a billion pounds in real terms since 2010. We have committed £1 billion to tackling rough sleeping and homelessness and made a manifesto pledge to eliminate rough sleeping by 2027 and halve it by 2022.

No one watching our exchanges today can be in any doubt that Britain faces a choice. We have a plan to get our economy growing. The shadow Chancellor says it does not matter whether GDP grows or not. We have a plan to get people on the housing ladder, while the shadow Chancellor does not want “to get bogged down in property rights”. We have a plan to deal with our debts. The shadow Chancellor wants to send debts soaring because he fantasises that he can borrow for free.

The choice is clear: our vision of a dynamic, modern economy, or the Labour party's vision of an inward-looking, narrow-minded country. We have to win this argument, because if we do not, it will be ordinary people—not the rich and the powerful and not the globally mobile—who pay the price, as they always do for Labour's failings.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his very forceful statement based on competent government and grown-up politics, which are worlds that the shadow Chancellor will never enter. When my right hon. Friend comes to prepare his Budget for November, I am sure he will be looking for

any new source of taxation that may be needed to put even more money than he already has into the NHS and social care, which are facing vast increases in demand.

May I suggest that my right hon. Friend looks at some of the extraordinary anomalies he has inherited in the tax treatment of older prosperous people in full-time work in this country? *[Laughter.]* Well, I think I am perfectly well placed to make my point and cannot be accused of personal bias. It is absurd that older employees pay less tax on their income than their younger colleagues because they do not pay national insurance. It cannot be right that people in large houses enjoying capital gains from the housing market have those disregarded for means test purposes if they ever need certain types of social care. As the early Budgets in a Parliament are a time for tough and difficult decisions, will my right hon. Friend let me know that he will be looking at those much overdue anomalies, which need to be addressed? Some justice between the generations, I think, is being demanded by our constituents.

Mr Hammond: I am a great fan of the concept of intergenerational fairness. My right hon. and learned Friend will know, as a former Chancellor of the Exchequer, that all Chancellors look at all options in the run-up to every Budget. I can undertake that I will do so in the run-up to Budget 2018. In the meantime, I can tell him that there is a mechanism for voluntary donations to Her Majesty's Treasury, and in case he has mislaid it, I will send him a copy of our bank details.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I have to say, that was much ado about nothing. The real tragedy is that we are 10 years on from the financial crisis, but austerity is still with us, and there was a lack of hope given to the people of the United Kingdom from the statement today.

At the weekend, we saw the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) at the Glasgow Celtic versus Rangers football match, in his other job as a linesman, waving his flag and enthusiastically calling for a red card. If anybody deserves a red card today, it is the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

We hear the Chancellor proclaiming that we have had consistent economic growth since 2010 and that we can look forward to continued economic growth over the course of the coming years. The reality is that in 2019, when we are supposed to be leaving the European Union, the OBR predicts that growth will be a measly 1.3% and is forecast to remain at around 1.5% over the coming years, significantly below the historical trendline of growth for this country.

When I hear the Chancellor talking about wage growth, he ought to reflect that we have had a lost decade of wage growth in the United Kingdom. Let me prick his balloon on this one, because the OBR book is very clear that real earnings growth will "remain subdued" for the next five years. That is the reality, and perhaps the Chancellor should stop spinning and be honest with people about what is going to happen. The Chancellor talks about light at the end of the tunnel. Let me tell him that the light at the end of the tunnel is a hard Brexit and the impact of lower growth, which is going to cost jobs and prosperity in this country.

Slow earnings growth, higher inflation and cuts to the benefit system are resulting in falling incomes for the poorest households and in rising inequality. Once

again, the Chancellor has failed to bring his Government's disastrous austerity programme to an end. Worse still, he has his head firmly in the sand over Brexit.

This Government are going ahead with a devastating cut to Scotland's budget. *[Interruption.]* I hear the Scottish Tories shouting "Rubbish". Perhaps they could join those of us on the SNP Benches and defend Scotland's interests. Let me explain the reality: over the decade from 2010-11 to 2019-20, Scotland's block grant has been cut by £2.6 billion in real terms, which is an 8.1% cut. *[Interruption.]* The people of Scotland should watch the Scottish Tory MPs who are calling out: once again, they are failing to stand up for Scotland's interests. *[Interruption.]* Let me say respectfully that these Tory MPs have been here for quite some months, and they should understand that if they want to speak, they should try to catch your eye, Mr Speaker. It is undignified to call out in the way they are doing. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. There is much excitable gesticulation taking place on both sides of the House. I urge Members to keep their Order Papers to themselves, and not to lash out with their hands, gesticulating in all sorts of directions. They are in danger of becoming rather eccentric denizens of the House.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Mr Speaker. These are, after all, serious matters. The extent of the block grant reduction is highlighted by the Fraser of Allander Institute, which has noted:

"By 2019/20 the resource block grant will be around £500 million lower than in 17/18".

I pay tribute to my hon. Friends on the SNP Benches who fought so hard on behalf of their constituents to have Police Scotland and Scottish Fire and Rescue Service VAT scrapped. That was a fantastic result. However, the reality is that Scotland has suffered under this policy for the past five years. Will the Chancellor be bringing forward plans to return the £175 million that has already been paid? VAT should never have been charged: it was a vindictive measure imposed on Scotland by a Tory Government. Give Scotland back the £175 million to invest in our frontline services. Will Scottish Tory MPs join the SNP in standing up for Scotland, or will they remain silent on the cash grab we have seen from Westminster?

This Tory Government's austerity policies disproportionately affect the most disadvantaged individuals, while giving tax breaks to the better-off in society. The Resolution Foundation recently estimated that the Government's austerity programme will leave the poorest third of households an average of £715 a year worse off by 2022-23. In Scotland, we have a new progressive income tax policy. *[Interruption.]* I can hear Conservatives saying, "Up", but the reality is that for most people in Scotland tax is lower. The Scottish Government are able to reverse this year's real-terms budget cut inflicted by this Tory Government, and ensure that the majority—I repeat, the majority—of taxpayers in Scotland pay less than in the rest of the UK.

However, Scotland's new taxation powers should not exist simply to mitigate UK Government austerity. In Scotland, the SNP Government have gone further to support those on low incomes. In the recent budget at Holyrood, a package was secured that raises the threshold of a guaranteed 3% increase for those earning up to

[*Ian Blackford*]

£36,500, benefiting up to three quarters of Scottish public service workers—a Scottish Government on the side of hard-working public sector workers.

As we near the EU summit at the end of this month in Brussels, the progress of this Government in readying for Brexit has been nothing short of shameful. The UK Government's own analysis tells us that, under all scenarios, Scotland would suffer a relatively greater loss in economic output than the United Kingdom as a whole. A no-deal scenario would be significantly devastating, threatening to reduce growth by a massive 9% over 15 years.

Make no mistake: a hard Brexit is going to hit the pockets of families and lead to a loss in tax revenue expectations, and is therefore going to affect spending on public services, yet the Chancellor is silent on the risks to our economy—risks to our economy when the stresses and strains of a near decade of austerity are hurting. The fact is that Scotland is shackled to a sinking ship.

The Scottish budget passed last month illustrates the real divergence in political choices across the UK. In Scotland, we have chosen to stand by our outstanding public sector staff and give them the pay increase they deserve. We continue to mitigate the worst atrocities of this Government's ideological austerity agenda. We will continue to press for nothing less than continued UK membership of the single market and customs union to prevent the economic catastrophe of an extreme Tory Brexit. We will never stop fighting to get justice for the 1950s women, whom the SNP are so happy to support.

In conclusion, the choices are clear and the opportunities obvious. The Chancellor must wake up to the economic injustices he has overseen, and he must tell this House as a matter of urgency how the economy will stand a hard Brexit.

Mr Hammond: Probably a matter of rather more immediate urgency for the people of Scotland is how their economy will withstand the highest rates of taxation in the United Kingdom—an economy that, under the SNP Government, is already growing more slowly than the economy of the United Kingdom. I do not know about a sinking ship; I suggest to the right hon. Gentleman that this is about keeping afloat.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about earnings. I suggest that he looks at real household disposable income, which, as I am sure he knows, is now 4.4% higher than at the start of 2010. We have cut taxes for 31 million people across this country, at a time when his Government are putting taxes up. We have taken 4 million people out of taxation, improving the ability of people to retain their hard-earned incomes.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about Brexit, spreading alarm, but he knows very well that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is working tirelessly to deliver a Brexit that will secure British jobs, British businesses and British prosperity. We would be aided in that enterprise if he and his Government worked closely with us to deliver an outcome that is good for the whole of the United Kingdom.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about Scotland's budget and the block grant, but of course Scotland now has its own tax-raising powers, and the people of Scotland

know how he intends to use them. Perhaps he has forgotten, but I will try to help him with his short-term amnesia: at the autumn Budget in 2017—just four months ago—Scotland received an additional £2 billion of funding as a result of the measures announced then.

As for the VAT on police and fire services measures being vindictive, the Scottish National party Government were told explicitly that it would not be possible to refund VAT if they went ahead with the police reorganisation, and they decided to do so anyway. He may use the adjective “vindictive”, but I suspect my right hon. and hon. Friends will be able to think of another adjective to describe a Government who pursued such a ridiculous course of action.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I gently remind the House that, whatever impression might have been given so far, this is not a debate; it is a question and answer session following a ministerial statement.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I congratulate the Chancellor on his balanced approach. He and the Prime Minister have rightly identified housing as an economic and social priority. He will be aware that the Treasury Committee's report on his autumn 2017 Budget recommended that the housing revenue account borrowing cap could be lifted to allow local authorities to play their part in building the right homes in the right places. Is that something he will consider?

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. We have already relaxed the borrowing cap for local authorities in areas with high demand and low affordability. We will monitor the consequences carefully and keep how it delivers under continuous review.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The light that the Chancellor can see at the end of the tunnel is the Brexit locomotive barrelling headlong towards him, and towards our schools and hospitals. What will he do to prevent that free trade agreement-style scenario, which his own Treasury officials say will leave a £55 billion train wreck in our public services?

Mr Hammond: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am committed to delivering a Brexit that protects British jobs, British businesses and British prosperity, and I spend a significant amount of my working time ensuring that that is the route we follow. I expect that we will make further progress at the March European Council. I understand the concerns that he expresses on behalf of British businesses, but I talk to businesses all day, every day, because that is my job—[*Interruption.*] The shadow Chancellor says so does he, so he will know this already. Business is concerned about what the consequences of a bad Brexit deal could be, but business is much more concerned about the consequences of the policies advanced by his right hon. Friends on the Opposition Front Bench.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): May I say what a huge pleasure it is to hear the Chancellor so upbeat, and indeed Tiggerish? He has a right to be so, given that unemployment is at its lowest level for 40 years, and manufacturing is seeing

its best performance for 50 years. Given his answer to our right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) on looking at every avenue for money, and given that we will be about four months away from our official departure date, at the next Budget will my right hon. Friend consider setting out in the Red Book what he plans to do with the money that we will no longer have to pay in contributions to the European Union?

Mr Hammond: It is always a pleasure to hear from my right hon. Friend. We are absolutely not complacent, because there are many challenges as well as opportunities ahead of us, but we have a plan to embrace the opportunities and rise to the challenges. This country has many advantages that our neighbours would give their right arm to enjoy. We must go forward robustly and in good heart to seize those opportunities and make the best of them for the future. On his specific point, of course in the forthcoming Budget we will look at taxation and spending over the future period. The OBR, of course, will decide what to present in its report to the House. He will have an opportunity to question OBR officials about their approach when they appear before the House shortly after the Budget statement.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Consumer credit has risen by 9% over the past year, and the ratio of household debt to income, at 138%, is rapidly approaching a level not seen since before the financial crisis. With interest rates now forecast by the OBR to rise faster than we previously envisaged, are we not asking consumers to keep the wheels on the road for the economic recovery? Is that sustainable, and is that the right thing to do?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue. It is something we keep under constant review, and I talk regularly with the Governor of the Bank of England about personal debt. She will probably know that personal household debt rose in all but one of the 13 years of the Labour Government, and it is now lower than it was before the financial crisis. The judgment of the authorities at the moment is that household debt levels are sustainable, but she is right to draw attention to it. It is something we keep under close review.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Can the Chancellor give more detail on the announcement that the Office for National Statistics will work with the Treasury on a more sophisticated measure of human capital? In a knowledge-based economy, that becomes more crucial than ever for driving our economic productivity. Can he give us more detail on the timelines and the nature of that work?

Mr Hammond: I am glad that my right hon. Friend has asked this question, because it gives me an opportunity to thank her for sparking this line of inquiry in a letter she wrote to me. I did challenge the Treasury with the idea that it is more focused on the returns to infrastructure investment than on skills investment. When we looked at it in detail, we discovered that the metrics for measuring the returns to investment in human capital are not as well developed as they should be. That is something the ONS has to take forward, but it is important, as we move increasingly into a knowledge-based economy, with a huge set of technological changes ahead of us,

that we can compare appropriately and objectively investment in physical infrastructure with investment in human capital, and that is what we will be able to do if we get the new metrics right.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Chancellor of the Exchequer is doubtless aware that the OECD this morning published its own growth forecasts, putting us at the bottom of the OECD economies, with forecast growth this year of 1.3%. It is pretty clear that there is no Brexit dividend on the scene for the British economy. It is to be welcomed that the deficit is getting back to a manageable level, but he must know—even his own Back Benchers are telling him—that extra money is needed now for our hospitals, our schools and our police. That money is not there because of previous decisions to make premature cuts to capital gains tax and inheritance tax. He must have heard the Institute for Fiscal Studies calling for increased capital investment in housing, up to 3% of our economy. Why does he not listen to the IFS?

Mr Hammond: First, the right hon. Gentleman knows, as I do, that our economy still faces uncertainty as we go through the negotiation process with the European Union. I am convinced, from every conversation I have had with business leaders and investors, that as we deliver greater clarity about our future relationship with the European Union over the coming months, we will see business investment and consumer confidence increasing. We beat the forecast in 2017. Let us beat it again in 2018. I do believe that economic growth matters. The shadow Chancellor says that it does not matter what the level of GDP is, but I do not agree—[*Interruption.*] Well, I will send him the quote if he cannot immediately recall what he said. I do believe that GDP matters, because it is what drives living standards. We are putting extra money into public services—£11 billion since I have been Chancellor. I agree that we have a major challenge in the housing market. We have put a significant amount of money—£44 billion—into dealing with the challenge over the rest of this Parliament, but there are significant non-financial constraints on being able to do more, such as physical bottlenecks in relation to skilled labour and materials. But it is something we will keep under review.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Perhaps the current Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer could remind the previous Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer that, given where our electoral support comes from, it might not be wise politics to impose a targeted new tax on our older supports. He could also remind our right hon. and learned Friend that he will be delighted to know that after we leave the EU we will be saving £12 billion a year in contributions.

Mr Hammond: I assume that my hon. Friend is referring to the previous Conservative Chancellor but one, in which case I think our right hon. and learned Friend has probably heard him.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The winter crisis in the NHS left us with cancelled operations, ditched targets, patients sleeping on the floor, and a public apology in the end from the Prime Minister. Neither the spring nor the spring statement

[Yvette Cooper]

has provided any easing of those pressures. Given that the right hon. Gentleman knows the November Budget will be too late to provide any additional funding that he knows both the NHS and social care will need for next year's winter crisis—he knows this both in his heart and in his spreadsheet—will he now follow the Prime Minister and announce a public apology to the staff and patients of the NHS who are going to have to endure next year's crisis because of this failure?

Mr Hammond: I have already made it clear that we admire greatly the work of NHS staff who, with the pressures of flu and extreme winter weather, faced extremely difficult circumstances this winter. This is a spring statement, not a fiscal event, but I have said and I will say again to the right hon. Lady that we are putting an additional £4 billion into the NHS in 2018-19, and I have committed to putting in further money in-year in 2018-19 to fund a pay settlement for nurses and "Agenda for Change" staff, if the management and the unions reach an agreement.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): It is very welcome to hear from the Chancellor such good news on debt and growth, in particular their effect on the real lives of people in my constituency, where since 2010 youth unemployment is down 48% and apprenticeships are up 6,850. In continuing his successful balanced approach, will he commit to dealing with the social care sector, because we both know it will become an increasingly important issue in the years and decades ahead?

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who has done a great deal of work on this issue. We are absolutely aware of the pressures on the social care system. They are not short-term pressures; they are driven by the demographics of an ageing population. We have to do three things. In the short term, we have provided additional money. In the spring Budget last year, I put in £2 billion of additional support. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government put in another £150 million of social care grant at the local government settlement just a few weeks ago. In the medium term, we have to work to get all authorities meeting the standards of the best. There is excellent practice across the country, but it is not everywhere. The variation in delayed discharges between different authorities is completely unacceptable. In the long term, we are committed to publishing a Green Paper on social care and the future of social care, which we will deliver to the House before the summer recess.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Chancellor says that forecasts are there to be beaten and I agree with him, so can he explain to me why, since his Budget in November, the OBR has not been able to increase the growth forecast for 2019, 2020, 2021 or 2022? It cannot be the negative impact of Brexit, because the OBR still does not have the information from the Government to be able to forecast that, so what on earth is his excuse?

Mr Hammond: I will perhaps remind the hon. Lady that the OBR's autumn report in November was only four months ago and that in the normal course of events one would not expect, in the absence of some shock to the economy, economic forecasts to change

very significantly. The front-end forecast has changed, because the outturn for 2017-18 has changed. The OBR forecast growth 0.2% lower than it turned out to be in 2017-18 and that has a knock-through effect, which has increased its growth projection for this year.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): Investing in our economy creates jobs and growth, and successful businesses drive that. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House how much the corporate tax take has gone up since the cut in corporation tax? Will he confirm that he will do nothing to hinder our internationally competitive corporate tax rates?

Mr Hammond: Yes, I can. I am happy to tell my hon. Friend that since we reduced the rate of corporate tax to 19%, the yield—the amount of tax we raise for our public services, our hospitals and schools—has gone up 54%. It is clear that being one of the most competitive tax jurisdictions in the G20 is one of the determining factors in many investment decisions coming to the UK, creating the jobs and prosperity we need for the future.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Chancellor is right to talk up the UK economy when there is good news, because there are plenty in this House who will recklessly talk it down. There was, however, one gap in today's statement. He promised an inquiry, in time for the autumn Budget, into air passenger duty and VAT on the hospitality industry. When will he make an announcement on when that inquiry will start and on the terms of it?

Mr Hammond: I have laid a written ministerial statement today that sets out the reviews and consultations, and that is among them. If the right hon. Gentleman looks at that after this statement he will see that it is there.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): May I draw the attention of the Chancellor to the recent research published by the International Monetary Fund, which shows that the choice we made in 2010 to deal with the deficit primarily by controlling spending rather than raising taxes, as the Opposition would have done, was the right choice? It meant that the economy grew faster than those of our European competitors and has put him in the position where he can deliver more money for our priorities, while reducing the debt in the balanced way he has set out.

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. He is right: it was the right choice. Because we made that choice, throughout that period employment in this country continued to grow. We avoided the very high levels of unemployment suffered by many of our European neighbours. We avoided the catastrophic, generation-blighting levels of youth unemployment suffered by many of our European neighbours, which will be affecting their economies and societies not just for a few more years but for 30, 40 or 50 years to come. It was the right decision. We have executed our plan and we should stick to it.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Chancellor has been very upbeat today, but why is he so upbeat when the growth figures show that we have gone from being near the top of the G7 and the G20 growth lists to the bottom of both?

Mr Hammond: I am clear—I think I have alluded to this already—that one of the factors depressing the forecast growth is the uncertainty that still exists around the economy. If the hon. Lady, like me, expects that uncertainty to dissipate over time, she should look through it to the fundamentals of our economy and its underlying strengths. This economy is in a fundamentally good shape. Once we can restore confidence and certainty about our future path, I am confident that those fundamental strengths will deliver increased economic growth.

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): My right hon. Friend made a fantastic statement. Does he join me in welcoming the 65% fall in youth unemployment in South Suffolk since 2010? Does he agree that while my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) is entirely right to mention inter-generational fairness, the worst form of intergenerational unfairness would have been to allow our youth unemployment to peak at socially dangerous levels, as it has in the rest of Europe?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I welcome the very large fall in youth unemployment in his constituency, but that will be from a base that was very much lower than what has come to be considered normal by many of our European neighbours. As he rightly says, this is not just an economic factor, but a societal factor. Persistent high levels of youth unemployment have a hugely damaging effect, as we have discovered in the past in this country to our cost. If someone is unemployed during their formative years, they are far more likely to remain unemployed and unemployable for the rest of their working lives.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It is astonishing that Brexit, the single biggest risk to the economy, merited only two sentences in the Chancellor's otherwise uneventful spring statement. If the economy and economic outlook are so rosy, perhaps he can explain why almost every school in my constituency is facing budget cuts, why my local NHS trust is in special measures, and why, when my constituents are crying out in the face of one of the worst waves of burglaries we have ever seen, the police are not responding because the Metropolitan police is subject to real-terms budget cuts. Is that not the grim reality facing our country, and is it not set to get worse because of the hard Brexit course his Government are following?

Mr Hammond: No. The Government are pursuing a Brexit that protects British jobs, British businesses and British prosperity, as the hon. Gentleman well knows. We have protected school funding so that it will rise in real terms per pupil over the next two years, and as we move to the fair funding formula for schools, every school will receive a cash increase. The police settlement on which the House recently voted provides £450 million of additional resource for police forces across the country. We have protected police budgets since 2015.¹

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): The OBR's report—I refer to table B.7 and chart B.4—assumes that the Brexit dividend will be recycled into ordinary expenditure. I wonder whether the Chancellor

accepts that conclusion. If so, what thought has he given to spending this money, and is the NHS near the top of his list?

Mr Hammond: As I suspect my hon. Friend knows well, this is the assumption that the OBR has adopted at the last three fiscal events. It has assumed that any saving from a lower contribution to the European Union will be recycled to fund things that would have been funded by the EU, but will no longer be so. How we choose to use that money and what our priorities are will, of course, be an issue for this Parliament, but we should note that we have already made certain commitments—to our agricultural community, for example—to maintain spending at EU levels until the end of this Parliament.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I have to say that the levels of hypocrisy from the Government are quite extraordinary. How can the Chancellor pledge to be improving air quality while simultaneously boasting of undertaking the largest road building programme since the 1970s? How can he say that the plastics crisis is urgent and then propose a deadline for the elimination of plastics in a quarter of a century's time? Where is the latte levy? Where is the deposit scheme? Where is the urgency for action? Why is there such a gulf between the Government's action and words?

Mr Hammond: I am tempted to say, "Eeyore." I think that the hon. Lady is making a fundamental mistake by linking the road building programme to air quality. I urge her to take at least a medium-term view of the world. The vehicle fleet is decarbonising. Certainly within her lifetime, if not mine, we will have fully electric vehicles, and probably autonomous ones as well. We should think of the road building programme not as a negative feature, but as an enabler in the transformation of how our vehicle fleet works. We have made announcements today, and I hope that she will be pleased with the consultation on VED for vans. This is a much-needed approach to incentivise van drivers to buy the cleanest and greenest vehicles available.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I strongly welcome the housekeeping dividend that my right hon. Friend set out in the spring statement, particularly with its focus on the cost of living and skills. In the forthcoming Budget, I ask him to continue that focus on the cost of living, to maintain the freeze in fuel duty, and to develop a skills strategy with the Department for Education to ensure that we meet the needs of the fourth industrial revolution.

Mr Hammond: If my right hon. Friend will forgive me, I will not make a commitment ahead of the next Budget on any specific tax or duty measures, but of course we will maintain the focus on the cost of living and living standards. He will know—I certainly know—that one of the biggest problems that we have faced over the last year has been the impact on real wages of high levels of inflation. Getting that inflation back down to target is a crucial priority, and I am delighted that we will see real wages rising again from next month as a result of falling inflation and strong nominal wage growth.

1. [Official Report, 24 April 2018, Vol. 639, c. 8MC.]

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): I cannot believe that the Chancellor did not have more to say about the NHS in this statement. The NHS in my area is not just in crisis, but at breaking point. He refers to putting an extra £4 billion into the NHS in the current financial year, but if we extrapolate what the OBR says that the NHS will need just to keep current standards of care going and to meet rising demand, we will need at least £30 billion extra going into the NHS by 2022-23. We need a solution that can subsist across Governments of different persuasions, so will he meet the demand that the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) and others across both Houses have made for a proper, cross-party convention on how we put our NHS on a sustainable footing? Secondly, will he support the suggestion of the former permanent secretary of his Department for a proper, hypothecated NHS tax to help to give it the funding that it needs?

Mr Hammond: I suspect that now is not the moment for a long debate about the structural funding challenges of the NHS, but the hon. Gentleman is right. We have an ageing population. Technology is driving an ever-wider array of interventions that can and should be made to support people with medical conditions—particularly chronic medical conditions—and we have to look at how to ensure that our NHS remains sustainable in the future. Of course we are looking at that issue. I will not give him a commitment today at the Dispatch Box on how we will do that, but it is absolutely something that we need to do. I very much hope, as he suggests, that this could be done on a serious, cross-party basis, but I fear that his Front Benchers would not be able to resist the temptation to try to play politics with any such serious discussion.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It was excellent to hear the Chancellor talk about educational investment and our human capital. Further to the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), will he explain further whether the Treasury will create standards that will technically value human capital across our Government Departments? That can then drive decision making so that taxpayers' money is best spent to maximise the human capital that we invest in so much through education and training, rather than being wasted.

Mr Hammond: We have asked the ONS to look at this and to consider the metrics that we could use. The objective is to be able to assess clearly where the marginal pound of capital investment should go to achieve the best effect on the economy. Without wanting to pre-empt the outcome of that work, I suspect that in the future, in a very rapidly changing economy, we will find that retraining and upskilling will be a very large part of our investment requirement.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Would the Chancellor be good enough either to meet me or send me a letter to outline the blockers to the Ayrshire growth deal, to which the UK Government have not yet committed?

Mr Hammond: It would be for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to have that meeting with the hon. Gentleman, but I am very happy to pass on his request.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend made any assessment of the Venezuelan economic model that is so favoured by the shadow Chancellor? I understand the Venezuelan Government have made huge progress on reducing income inequality. Unfortunately, as is always the case with socialism, they have done so by pushing 80% of the population into poverty.

Mr Hammond: Actually, while watching Russia Today, I saw a very interesting piece on the Venezuelan economy—apparently everything is going swimmingly.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), the Chancellor suggested that our economy will be stronger once there is greater certainty over Brexit. Can he confirm that the Treasury analysis published last week showed that under all the Government's Brexit options, long-term growth will be lower than it would otherwise have been? Does he not realise that that will be the true legacy of his Government and his party, which can no longer claim to act in the national economic interest?

Mr Hammond: Just to correct the hon. Lady on a couple of points, the report that she refers to, which was published by the Exiting the European Union Committee, was not done by HM Treasury. It was prepared, as I think she knows very well, by a cross-departmental group of Government economics professionals in response to the criticism that had been levied at the Treasury model that was used before the referendum. Of course it did not model the Government's preferred outcome scenario; it modelled a couple of standardised outcome scenarios that the Prime Minister has already rejected. We are not going for a Norway model or a Canada model. We are negotiating with the EU for a bespoke solution. When we have made progress in those negotiations, we will model the outcome that we expect to get, and when Parliament comes to vote on this issue—hopefully later this year—it will have in front of it the output of that modelling.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his upbeat performance, and on standing up for the economy and our country. As a former soldier, may I put in a plug for our armed forces? They undoubtedly need more money. We live in dangerous times. Will he take that into account in the Budget?

Mr Hammond: As a former Defence Secretary, I yield to no one in my admiration for the armed forces. I understand the challenges that defence faces and the complexity of the defence budget, with its many long-term projects operating at the cutting edge of technology. In case there is any misapprehension, however, I would like the House to be absolutely clear that defence will receive more than £1 billion of additional funding in each year of this Parliament. It has the fastest-growing RDEL—resource departmental expenditure limits—budget of any Department across Whitehall. We will, of course, continue to consider the specific needs of defence, but I would not like anyone to have the impression that, as I have read in some organs, the defence budget is being cut. It is not—it is being substantially increased.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Much is not under the Chancellor's control, but the subject of my question is. One year ago, we were promised that Making Tax Digital would be put back to help small businesses, but in the intervening time—since the election—very little progress has been made in the countryside on broadband roll-out, so will he please consider putting it back by another year for small businesses?

Mr Hammond: No. We made our decision to defer Making Tax Digital mainly because there was a need for greater awareness among businesses and more time to prepare for the relevant software and so on. We are confident that businesses will be able to roll out the programme on the current schedule. Although I readily accept that there is some disquiet among potential business users, I also confidently predict to the hon. Lady that once they have got used to it, they will find that it is hugely beneficial to them, and that it saves them a lot of time and angst in their dealings with HMRC.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Since 2010, the minimum wage has increased from £5.93 to £7.83 an hour—a rise of 32%. At the same time, the take-home pay of someone on the minimum wage has gone up by 37%, thanks to the increase in the income tax threshold. Will the Chancellor join me in welcoming the fact that the Government have directed assistance at those on the lowest earnings, and will he assure the House that that excellent approach will remain at the heart of the Government's strategy?

Mr Hammond: We are focused on the needs of those on the lowest pay who are in the workforce. Making work pay, particularly low-paid work, is a priority. I repeat what I said in the statement: partly as a result of the introduction of the national living wage and its subsequent increase to £7.83 an hour, income inequality in this country is now lower than at any point under the last Labour Government. It is falling in this country while it is rising in all other G7 countries.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Today's statement was an opportunity for the Government to ease the burden on care providers by offering a solution to the sleep-in crisis. Sleep-in shifts are an integral part of public services which the Government have a statutory obligation to provide. Have the Government ruled out paying directly and in full the six years of back pay to which low-paid careworkers are entitled?

Mr Hammond: I am not sure about the end of the hon. Lady's question. Is she asking whether the Government have ruled anything out? The Government have not ruled out anything—we are still considering this issue. Of course these workers must have the pay to which they are entitled and which they should have been paid. What we are doing—the Cabinet Office is leading on this—is working with the key providers to see how best to deliver that in a way that does not have negative impacts on the provision of care.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): Youth unemployment in my constituency has fallen by 55% under the Conservatives, which is fantastic news. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the last thing young people in Teesside need is a reckless borrowing binge to reverse that progress?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Over the past few years, parts of the country that have suffered for far too long from low employment and investment have seen increased investment—much of it foreign investment—as well as increased employment and rising wages. They absolutely do not need to take risks on the kind of policies that the shadow Chancellor is proposing, which would plunge us back into a place we have been before and have no wish to revisit.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): People doing the same job should be entitled to the same day's pay, but the Chancellor continues to ignore the fact that his pretendy living wage is not for under-25s, as 21 to 24-year-olds will earn 45p less an hour; 18 to 20-year-olds £1.93 less; 16 and 17-year-olds £3.63 less; and apprentices a full £4.13 less. Why does he believe in state-sponsored age discrimination?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady will know, I think, that we also announced—again, this is due to come in in April—record increases in the youth rates of the minimum wage. We have had several exchanges in this Session about the importance of maintaining low levels of youth unemployment and about the devastating effects of youth unemployment—[*Interruption.*]. I am sorry if she does not like this. The Government take advice from the Low Pay Commission about the impacts of different pay rates on employment prospects, and we balance the need to give people a fair wage with the need to maintain high levels of youth employment, in the interests of those people themselves and of our economy.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I welcome the projection that real wages will increase in the coming year, but that can continue in the longer term only if we improve our productivity. In that context, may I welcome not only what the Chancellor has said about human capital and long-term endeavour, but the improvements in productivity over the last six months?

Mr Hammond: Yes, and my hon. Friend is right to draw attention to two quarters of very good productivity data. I do not want to change policy or to pivot on the basis of two quarters' data, because data can be revised, but we are starting to think that we might just be at the beginning of a turn in the trajectory of productivity performance in this economy.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Liverpool has many success stories, but 30% of its children are in poverty and our public services are under pressure as Liverpool City Council loses 68% of its funding. The whole economy is threatened by Brexit. What will the Chancellor do differently to address these injustices?

Mr Hammond: Obviously the best way out of poverty is to get people into work, and the proportion of workless households is at its lowest level since records began. The hon. Lady will know that 200,000 fewer children are in absolute poverty than was the case in 2010. We are focused on using our modern industrial strategy to drive economic growth across the regions of our country, and on working with the elected Mayors and the devolved authorities to ensure that the necessary

[Mr Philip Hammond]

investment is made in all corners of the British economy to deliver the growth that is the only way to get people sustainably out of poverty and into well-paid work.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): May I congratulate the Chancellor on his progress to date, but ask him to consider investing in a long-term innovative strategy for transport infrastructure—road, rail, air and sea—in the south-west so as to drive productivity north and south of the peninsula, and to include a commitment to such a strategy in the Budget so that we build a great south-west to rival the northern powerhouse? We thank him for his support for the Peninsula Rail Task Force. It is welcome, but not enough.

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend will have to think of a snappy name for that—if she can, please will she let me know?

We are investing already in the south-west, including, as my hon. Friend will know, in the crucial A303 programme—£2 billion in a vital transport artery feeding the south-west. I know that many of the bids to the housing infrastructure fund come from south-west authorities, and we are acutely conscious that as we ask authorities to build more homes, we must provide them with the resource to build the supporting infrastructure—that is the purpose of the fund. I hope that she will get some good news when my hon. Friend the Housing Minister makes announcements in due course.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The number of apprenticeship starts plummeted after the botched introduction of the apprenticeship levy last year. I welcome the additional support for apprenticeships in small businesses that the Chancellor has announced today, but does he recognise that to get anywhere near the 3 million target by 2020 will require much more radical action, and will he return to that at the time of the Budget?

Mr Hammond: Our target—our commitment—is to deliver 3 million apprenticeships by 2020. The introduction of the apprenticeship levy changed the game, and we were always anticipating that it would have an impact on the profile of starts. The additional £80 million announced today is targeted specifically at small, non-levy-paying businesses to help them to take on apprentices. In a couple of weeks, at the beginning of April, large businesses that pay the levy will be allowed to transfer 10% of their levy funds to small businesses in their supply chain to support their engagement and training of apprentices. We will, however, keep the programme under close review. This is a commitment that we must deliver, and if we need to intervene in a different way to deliver it, we will.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): According to page 193 of the OBR report,

“The future is uncertain and the likelihood of unexpected...political developments means...there are significant...downside risks to...forecasts for the public finances.”

Does the Chancellor see any of those political downside risks sitting directly in front of him?

Mr Hammond: Yes. As I said earlier to an Opposition Member, in conversation, businesses—[*Interruption.*] Perhaps I should just sit down while the shadow Chancellor conducts his own conversation.

As I said earlier, businesses, in conversation, identified two risks about which they were concerned: the risk of a bad Brexit deal, which will have an impact on our economy, and the risk of the right hon. Gentleman's ever getting his hands on any of the levers of power in our economy. Of those two, there is no doubt that business—as represented in the voice of Paul Drechsler this morning—regards the risk posed by the right hon. Gentleman as by far the bigger.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The Chancellor has claimed that spending on disabled people has gone up, but we know that next month cuts in social security will hit them the hardest. He has also spoken about apologies. Would he like to apologise to the millions of disabled people whom he blamed for low productivity?

Mr Hammond: Of course I did no such thing. [*Interruption.*] No, I did not. We spend more than £50 billion a year on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions. That is a record high, and we have spent £7.5 billion more in real terms since 2010. As a share of GDP, our public spending on disability and incapacity is the second highest in the G7. It amounts to 2.5% of our GDP and to 6% of all Government spending.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): My right hon. Friend has struck the right balance between the need for financial discipline and the justifiable need for investment in public services. With that in mind, will he ensure in the autumn Budget that additional funds are provided for schools to ensure the successful implementation of the national funding formula, which we welcomed in Stockport?

Mr Hammond: When she was Education Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) announced that the fair funding formula would be introduced in a way that would protect per capita spending per pupil, and we would guarantee that every school would receive a cash-terms increase. That guarantee stands today.¹

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor talked about the increasing number of children being taken into care. In Liverpool, there has been an 11% increase in the past 12 months alone. Local authorities in the north-west wrote to the Chancellor last month calling for additional funds to address the growing crisis in children's social care. May I ask him to address that growing crisis, and to do so as a matter of urgency?

Mr Hammond: As I said earlier, spending on support for the most vulnerable children has increased by £500 million since 2010. There is a distinction to be drawn between services provided for the most vulnerable children—children in care, children in the adoption and fostering process, and children at risk—and the wider children's services budgets. The shadow Chancellor has made that point several times over the past week or so. Let me repeat, however, that we are giving local authorities

1.[*Official Report*, 24 April 2018, Vol. 639, c. 8MC.]

£225 billion of spending power over a five-year period, and it is for them to decide how they allocate those funds.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): There can be no truer test of a Government's commitment to fairness than their commitment to the next generation, and I know that the 7,110 young people who started apprenticeships in Redditch under this Government would agree with my right hon. Friend. Can he say more about the funds that he has set aside to help more small businesses such as those that I visited last week to access apprenticeships, and does he agree that the best place for his construction skills village is Redditch, a new town in the heart of the country?

Mr Hammond: I am glad to be able to tell my hon. Friend that there will be 20 construction skills villages. We look forward to the bid from Redditch, and I am sure that it will be considered carefully.

As I said earlier, my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary is contributing an extra £80 million specifically to help small businesses that are non-levy payers with the costs of engaging apprentices, and from April many small businesses will benefit from the flexibility that allows large business levy payers to transfer 10% of their levy funds to small businesses in their supply chain. The impression that I have from talking to the CBI and other organisations is that businesses are keen to do that, and many of them will make such transfers.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Is the OBR right to calculate in its report that the United Kingdom will be making payments to the European Union until 2064 as part of the divorce settlement and that that will not include any new commitments that the British Government may make in the remaining parts of the negotiation? Would it not be better just to stay in the EU?

Mr Hammond: The payment profile has three parts. There are payments during the two years—more or less—of the implementation period; there are payments as the EU dispenses the so-called *reste à liquider* over the following few years; and then there is a very long tail of what will actually be very small payments relating to pensions. Of course, by their nature, they will stretch over a very long period, but they are very small amounts of money.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Carlisle Lake District airport is about to open for passenger flights; we have a garden village development south of the city; and there is the prospect of a borderlands growth deal. Does the Chancellor agree that the only way to grow the economy and balance the books is through such investments? Does he also agree that it is important for the Government to support local initiatives of that kind, because they will help to rebalance the economy and sort out our finances?

Mr Hammond: Yes. Local government, local people and local businesses understand best how to grow the economies of their regions. I welcome the initiatives that my hon. Friend has mentioned. I am aware of the garden village, and I look forward to perhaps being able to visit it in the spring.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Is it not true that young people in our communities are paying the biggest price for this Government's choices and failures? Local government faces a funding gap of £5.8 billion by 2020. The income of my local council, Hounslow, has been cut by 40% since 2010, with more to come. There are 400,000 more children in poverty than five years ago, and in some wards in my constituency the proportion is now hitting 40%. The Chancellor asked to be judged on his record. Is that a record of which he is proud?

Mr Hammond: Yes, it is, because the figures given by the hon. Lady are not quite right. There are 200,000 fewer children in absolute poverty than in 2010. *[Interruption.]* Absolute poverty is the relevant measure. The crucial point that she simply skirts around is that, after the financial crash during the last Labour Government, we could have gone down a route that many of our continental neighbours went down, which would have seen hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of young people cast on to the scrapheap of unemployment and left there potentially for decades. We did not go down that route, and we have seen youth unemployment in this country relatively low and falling, and that is a huge benefit to the next generation, who will be able to benefit from their engagement in the workforce and, as they go forward, from rising living standards.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and the balanced approach to the economy he detailed. I particularly welcome the attention on digital and skills, as these are the main issues businesses are raising with me, and I hope Yorkshire will be one of his local full fibre allocations. Will he continue to focus on fibre and digital as critical to boosting our national productivity?

Mr Hammond: Yes, if we do not have these enabling network technologies—a good fibre-optic backhaul network, good digital technologies—we will not be able to exploit the technologies of the fourth industrial revolution, and we must do so.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Office for Budget Responsibility says that real earnings growth for the next five years is expected to remain subdued, averaging just 0.7% a year, and real household disposable income per person is expected to average only 0.4% per year. So why will the Chancellor not properly fund his Departments to ensure that the public sector pay freeze is properly lifted, as has been done in Scotland?

Mr Hammond: The public sector pay freeze has been lifted: we have removed the 1% cap, so it is up to departmental Secretaries of State to make appropriate recommendations and provide appropriate evidence to pay review bodies. But we do expect them, where they recommend settlements above the level they are already funded for, to use workforce management measures and efficiency improvement measures negotiated with the workforce, to ensure that over time increases are self-funded through higher efficiency and productivity.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Chancellor is right to focus on how the tax system might be used to encourage improvements in the environment, and I

[Mark Pawsey]

know that the packaging industry recognises the need to reduce waste and will respond positively to his call for evidence. I ask for it to include two things: first, that it is people who cause litter, and the Chancellor spoke about the need for behaviour change; and, secondly, will it recognise the important role packaging has in reducing food waste by keeping food fresh for longer?

Mr Hammond: Yes, of course, and the point of having a call for evidence is to make sure that the decisions we make are based on full knowledge and full information. My hon. Friend makes a very important point: it would be massively shooting ourselves in the foot to make a change in relation to packaging that then massively increased food waste and the energy cost of food that was wasted.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Why is the Chancellor refusing to share the light at the end of his tunnel with grieving parents who are struggling to pay for their children's funerals? Their lives are forever blighted by darkness. A children's funeral fund is the dignified, compassionate and sympathetic thing to do.

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady is a tireless campaigner on this issue, and both I and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister have heard her pleas on behalf of parents in this terrible situation. I am sure, however, that the hon. Lady recognises that this is not a fiscal event; there have been no fiscal announcements today, but I am absolutely certain that she will want to make a representation to me ahead of the Budget in the autumn.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I thank the Chancellor for his very spring-like statement, and it is good to hear that there is light at the end of the tunnel. What plans does he have to support our vital £90 billion creative industries sector, which is growing in my constituency of Clacton?

Mr Hammond: Creative industries is an increasingly important part of the UK economy, and one in which we have a significant comparative advantage, and the best way the Government can support the creative industries, apart from the obvious one of training and skilling, is through supporting the roll-out of digital technologies on which so many of the creative industries these days depend.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Chancellor's constituency will have families on the national living wage, and I have many more. Does he agree with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which has demonstrated that a two-parent family with one working and two children will, because of tax credit cuts, be £450 a year worse off? That is not fair shares, is it?

Mr Hammond: The national living wage has given a pay rise of more than £2,000 a year to anyone in full-time work since it was introduced in 2015, and of course it is not just the national living wage; it is also the increase in the personal allowance, which means that people are now able to keep more of what they take home, and because it is an allowance, rather than a rate cut, it disproportionately benefits those on the lowest earnings.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Fourth industrial revolution technologies are transforming and boosting productivity across the whole country, particularly in the small and medium-sized enterprise sector. As my right hon. Friend considers future spending priorities ahead of the Budget, may I urge him to continue and accelerate support for our entrepreneurs and innovators, who create the wealth of the future?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is a tireless advocate of the technology that will fuel the fourth industrial revolution, and the important thing is that, while we are talking about it, this is actually happening across the country. These technologies are actually being used by large, medium and small businesses. They are not just something in the laboratory or the university classroom; they are actually happening in the factories and business parks across Britain, and they will transform the way we live and work.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I am sure the Chancellor will agree that it is not talking down the economy to report in this place the real lived experiences of the people we represent, the majority of whom will not see real average wage incomes exceeding the pre-crash levels until 2022. Does he not agree that all the measures announced today and the rhetoric will not make a difference to those who need it most until their average incomes increase above the pre-crash levels? When will that happen?

Mr Hammond: Real income growth is the principal target that we focus on, but the country suffered a recession after the financial crisis that wiped out 6% of our national income, and we are rebuilding our economy from that crisis, hindered and hampered by the fact that the previous Government were ill-prepared for the crisis when it came. As I have made clear today, we are determined to ensure that our economy and public finances are in good shape to deal with the economic cycle in the future, because we do not believe that we have abolished that economic cycle, and we have to prepare for future downturns because that is the nature of economic life.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I welcome the progress made in reducing the debt and the deficit, but will the Chancellor confirm that we are still spending £50 billion in debt interest—more than the armed forces and police force combined receive—and if we do not get control of this, there will be less money for the things we value, such as the housing infrastructure fund, Oxfordshire's excellent submission for which is so important to my constituents?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is current spending; this is £50 billion that we could spend on hospitals, on schools, or, if we chose, on investment in infrastructure. The answer to this from the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) is to increase the amount of borrowing we have, and to increase the amount of money we are pouring down the drain every year on debt interest, reducing the amount of money available for our public services. That cannot be the right way to go.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): In spite of the claims for what will happen to real wages on April fool's day, the fact is that real wages are now lower than in 2010,

and debt has grown twice as fast under this Government as it did under the previous Labour Government, in spite of the global economic crash in 2008. So does the Chancellor agree that his strategy is failing people like my constituents, who are suffering from £6 billion of cuts to social care? They can no longer get care packages so they can die at home surrounded by their loved ones, but instead are stuck in hospital.

Mr Hammond: I do not agree with the hon. Lady, and her numbers are wrong, as I am sure she knows. The soaring deficit in 2009-10 has created a legacy that of course was going to lead to increasing debt. Our challenge has been to get the deficit down so that debt can now start to fall, and as debt starts to fall, we are able then to fund our public services, invest in Britain's future, and provide some relief for hard-pressed families and small businesses through easing their tax burden, and that is exactly what we intend to continue to do.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): A number of hon. Members have mentioned the next generation. Is it not the case that only this Government's approach can really deliver true intergenerational fairness, because the alternative is ever-increasing borrowing, which would be put on the shoulders of young people?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that point needs to be made more often. When the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington talks about borrowing an extra £100 billion, £250 billion or £350 billion—or whatever figure he is thinking about this week—and when he talks about nationalising an industry for £190 billion or whatever, he is talking about burdening the next generation with yet more debt that will blight their futures and limit their chances. That is not fair; it is not right, and we must make sure that he never gets the chance to do it.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): Some small businesses in Bury are still picking up the pieces following the Carillion collapse. Small business confidence in the north-west is at its lowest in four years, with UK skills shortages being blamed for some £3 billion of lost earnings. The Chancellor chose to come to the House today to give us this spring statement, yet he had nothing to say. We heard a fake news forecast with nothing for the real job creators. Will he give some certainty to the small businesses that are providing the jobs in towns such as mine, and will he stop this outsourcing to puffed-up vehicles such as Carillion, which appear to be too big to fail until the point when they do fail?

Mr Hammond: On the statement, the reason that I have come to the House to make this statement today is because the OBR has published its second report of the fiscal year. It is mandated by Parliament to produce two reports a year, and I think that the House would have regarded it as a gross discourtesy if I had published the report without coming to the House to answer questions on it. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned skills shortages. He will recognise that, while skills shortages are a serious problem, it is in a sense the better problem to have, rather than having skilled people looking for employment. The work is there, the jobs are there and the economic growth is there; we now have to respond to that by delivering the skills that people need.

On outsourcing, we will continue to pursue the best value for money for every pound of taxpayers' money that we spend, and where that involves collaborating with the private sector, that is what we will do. The way in which we have handled the Carillion situation has ensured that public services continue to be provided and that the public purse has not had to bail out a private company.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I should like to join the Scottish National party Finance Secretary in Holyrood in acknowledging the additional funding for Scotland's block grant. The extra £479 million will mean a real-terms increase over the next few years. Given that Scotland's GDP growth is forecast to be less than 1%, will my right hon. Friend commit to driving economic activity across all our constituencies through initiatives such as the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city deal?

Mr Hammond: Yes, but it is a pity that the SNP spokesman here did not feel inclined to acknowledge the same thing. My hon. Friend is right to suggest that we are a Government for the whole of the United Kingdom. It is not the Scottish people's fault that they have a Government who are adopting policies that are depressing economic growth in Scotland and will depress it further in the months and years ahead. We will go on delivering policies that are designed to improve the economy across the whole of the United Kingdom, including the growth deals in Scotland.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, it was revealed that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government returned £1.1 billion of unused housing money to the Treasury over the past two years. That money should have been spent on recladding tower blocks that were found to be unsafe after the Grenfell Tower tragedy. Will the Chancellor use his autumn Budget to fund the work that is required to keep our tower blocks and their residents safe?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend the Housing Minister and I have both made the point that local authorities and social landlords that have blocks that need recladding should carry out that work. Any work that is required for urgent safety reasons should be done, and any local authority or housing association that has a genuine inability to fund the work should get in touch with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which will work with them to find an appropriate solution. Safety-critical work must be carried out. That is the legal obligation of the landlord, and we will work with them to ensure that it is carried out.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's continued commitment to increasing the housing supply. I would also like to put in a bid for Erewash in relation to the construction skills villages. Does he agree that measures such as the housing infrastructure fund and the cut in stamp duty for first-time buyers will help many of my constituents to realise their ambition and aspiration to get on to the housing ladder?

Mr Hammond: Yes, the housing investment package that we have put together is important, because it has ensured that financial support will not be the constraining

[Mr Philip Hammond]

factor in building more homes in this country. We have other constraints—including skills constraints, land supply constraints and materials supply constraints—but finance will be available. The measure that I announced in the autumn Budget to remove stamp duty for 1 million first-time buyers will allow 1 million mostly young people once again to aspire to the dream of home ownership.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): On the Chancellor's announcement on cashless and digital measures, he claims that he will ensure that cash will be available for those who need it. He further claims that his is the party of small business. If he stands by that, will he come to Nairn, Grantown and Aviemore to explain to businesses there why, with more than 70% of the shares in the Royal Bank of Scotland at his command, he is failing to block the closure of its branches? The Federation of Small Businesses says that those closures will make it more difficult to do business in Scotland.

Mr Hammond: It is absolutely always a pleasure to visit Nairn, but I have no immediate plans to do so. As the Prime Minister has told the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends on several occasions, we do not interfere in the day-to-day management decisions of the Royal Bank of Scotland—[Interruption.] Let us treat this seriously. The consultation that we published today is about cashless and digital payment systems, but it specifically acknowledges, as I said in my statement, that we also have to ensure that cash is available to people who need it. If the hon. Gentleman looks at the consultation when it is published, he will see that we are determined to address that issue. I hope that he will engage in that consultation.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The Chancellor is right to look at the impacts of the VAT threshold on business. It is a disincentive to growth and an incentive to avoid tax through cash deals. Does he agree, however, that registering for VAT does not just have financial implications—it also has an administrative impact? Would this be an appropriate time to look at the entire VAT regime?

Mr Hammond: I think that that would involve widening the scope of the intended consultation rather dramatically. I remind the House that, when I referred to this issue in the autumn Budget, I said that I was not minded to lower the VAT threshold because I recognise that, at its current level, it keeps a lot of small businesses out of the administrative burden of VAT. However, we are keen to ensure that the cliff-edge effect, which has a damaging impact on businesses that are trying to grow, should be addressed if it is possible to do so. The consultation will pursue those ideas.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): There is a reason why we need to invest in our public services. In York, our schools have gone from being the seventh worst funded to the very worst funded authority, our NHS is in a capped expenditure process, and no social housing has been built. Should not the Chancellor invest in our children and in the sick, and provide homes for the homeless?

Mr Hammond: I am afraid that it is characteristic of the Opposition that they are able to see the world only through the lens of inputs—

Rachael Maskell: That is the reality!

Mr Hammond: The reality is that since 2010 we have increased the number of schools that are good or outstanding. That means that 90% of schools are now either good or outstanding, and that 1.9 million more children are being taught in good or outstanding schools. That is the metric that matters to parents and to children themselves in terms of their life chances. It is not always just about the money; it is also about the outcomes.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): I welcome the measures introduced by the Government to help the oil and gas industry, including a £2 billion package of support and the introduction of transferable tax history, which has been a much-needed shot in the arm. With the industry set to contribute over £1 billion in tax to the Treasury this financial year, will my right hon. Friend tell me what further steps the Government can take to support this vital sector?

Mr Hammond: We are committed to the oil and gas industry and, as my hon. Friend knows, to measures that will ensure that every drop of economically recoverable oil and gas in the UK continental shelf is recovered, which is in the interests of the Scottish economy, the UK economy and Her Majesty's Treasury. I am delighted that the increase in the price of oil, together with the uptick in activity as a result of that rise and of the measures that we have announced, means that the oil sector's contribution to the UK Treasury will again become positive in the year to come.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): The Conservatives have cut the Welsh Government's budget by around £1 billion a year since 2010, and the knock-on impact on public services in Wales and on Welsh local government's ability to deliver key services has been huge. Will the Chancellor apologise for the failed Tory austerity that has caused so much damage to public services in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney and across the UK? Given his outlining of a rosy picture, will he set out his plan adequately to fund the public services on which many people rely?

Mr Hammond: I do not have the figures to hand, but if my memory serves me correctly, I was able to confirm at the Budget last year that Wales will receive over £1 billion of additional funding, including as a result of changes to the agreed formula. So funding is not down, but up. The failure of services in Wales, mainly in the Welsh health service, that we regularly catalogue across the Dispatch Box is a result of decisions made and priorities set by the Welsh Government, not the UK Government.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Economies move in cycles. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a moral case for ensuring that our public finances are in a state to help the poorest in society, some of whom live in my constituency, when the next slowdown comes? Does he also agree that the Labour party manifestly failed to take that approach?

Mr Hammond: It did. My hon. Friend is right. It is precisely because we have seen the devastating impact of being unprepared for a serious economic downturn following a financial crash that we are determined to ensure that the UK economy is robustly prepared for the next normal cyclical downturn, whenever it occurs. Such things are normal, they happen in everyday economic life, and we must be able to ride through them without damage to our economy and without the poorest in our society paying the price. The poorest always pay when Labour's model fails.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Following the global financial crash, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act 2009, introduced by Obama, saw \$800 billion of investment pumped into the US economy, leading to the most sustained period of growth. By contrast, the UK embarked on a sustained period of austerity, and UK growth is now half that of the US and the eurozone. Which was the right ideological choice?

Mr Hammond: The United States is in a different position from the United Kingdom. Sadly, we no longer operate the world's reserve currency and are no longer able to borrow under the same conditions as the United States. Decisions on the United States economy are for the United States Administration. This Government have made the right decisions for the UK economy, and the benefit of those decisions—the outcomes that we are now beginning to see—demonstrates the case for them.

BILL PRESENTED

HOUSING AND PLANNING (LOCAL DECISION-MAKING) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

John Mann presented a Bill to remove powers of the Secretary of State in relation to the location of and planning permission for new housing developments; to give local authorities powers to establish requirements on such developments in their area, including requirements on the proportion of affordable and social housing; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 March, and to be printed (Bill 181).

Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) (Amendment)

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

2.43 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prevent the Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) Act 2009 from expiring on 11 November 2019.

It was on 10 November 1938 when the horrors of Nazi persecution began in earnest with the shameful episode known as Kristallnacht. Lives were lost during that terrifying “night of broken glass” but a key focus of the violent attacks that took place was property—the homes, buildings and businesses owned by Jewish people. Throughout the 1930s and '40s, property of all kinds was systematically stolen from millions of people as part of Hitler's horrific genocidal campaign against Europe's Jewish community. That included many precious works of art. It is estimated that up to 20% of Europe's cultural treasures were lost during world war two, and around 100,000 cultural objects pillaged during the Nazi era still remain hidden today. The horrific crimes of the Nazis can never be remedied, but there is action that we can take to return works of art to the people from whom they were stolen.

At the end of the last century, there was growing international awareness of the risk that looted art may have been inadvertently acquired by museums and galleries. That led to the 1998 Washington conference on holocaust era assets, where a number of countries, including the UK, pledged that they would work to identify treasures stolen by the Nazis and seek to return them to their rightful owners. Compared with other European countries, it seems that little looted art found its way to the UK, but that should not be an excuse for inaction.

In 2000, the previous Labour Government established the Spoliation Advisory Panel to consider claims from anyone who had lost possession of a cultural object in circumstances relating to the Nazi era. A problem arose in 2002, when the heirs of Dr Arthur Feldman sought the restitution of four old master drawings in the British Museum on the grounds that they had been stolen by the Gestapo from Dr Feldman's collection in March 1939 in what was then Czechoslovakia. The British Museum wanted to return the objects, but the High Court ruled that it could not lawfully do so. No matter the moral case for giving property back to the heirs of its owner, the museum was under a binding statutory obligation not to give away items in its collection. Several other national institutions were also subject to the same restriction.

That and other similar cases were raised in Parliament in 2009 by Andrew Dismore, who was the MP for Hendon at the time. He brought forward a private Member's Bill to remove the statutory restrictions on national institutions, such as the British Museum, that prevented them from returning works of art confiscated by the Nazis. With cross-party support, the Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) Bill received Royal Assent on 12 November 2009. It provides that the 17 national institutions named in the legislation have the power to return works of art to their rightful owners in cases where that is recommended by the advisory panel and approved by the Culture Secretary.

[Theresa Villiers]

However, section 4(7) of the 2009 Act contains a 10-year sunset clause, meaning that the Act will cease to have effect after 11 November next year. After that date, the institutions named in the legislation will no longer be able to return works of art to Holocaust survivors or to the families of those who perished in the genocide. The Bill that I am seeking leave to bring in would keep the legislation on the statute book by repealing section 4(7) and thus removing the sunset clause.

Parliament was entirely right in 2009 to give our national museums the power to restore property lost in such terrible circumstances to its rightful owners. The legislation was subject to exacting scrutiny and was significantly amended and clarified during its passage through Parliament. It has worked well during its eight years on the statute book, resolving cases in a fair and balanced way. Take, for example, the 12th century manuscript known as the Beneventan Missal. The advisory panel concluded that the manuscript had been looted during the chaos that followed the Allied bombing of Benevento in 1943, and, with the approval of the Secretary of State, the missal was returned to Italy. In 2015, a John Constable painting from the Tate Gallery was restored to its owner after the panel concluded that it had been stolen when the German army invaded Budapest in 1944.

The 2009 Act is a carefully targeted measure that applies to a defined and limited period and set of circumstances, so it does not open the door for more contentious claims relating to objects brought to the UK in past centuries and under different circumstances. The Act has not had a disruptive impact on our national museums. When the proposal to keep the measure on the statute book was announced in 2017, it was warmly welcomed by the museum community. Today the director of the National Gallery, Dr Gabriele Finaldi, issued the following statement:

“The museum community is committed to fair and just redress in the case of works taken wrongfully during the Holocaust and World War II. It is fully supportive of the proposal to amend the Act by removing the so-called sunset clause.”

The task of identifying and returning objects that have an incomplete history during the relevant period is by no means at an end. As recently as last September, the Government hosted an international conference in

London to consider how efforts to identify and give back works of art lost during the holocaust could be accelerated. The UK has been at the forefront of global efforts to resolve those cases in a fair way, and the 2009 Act has played an important part in that. The 2009 legislation had the backing of the last Labour Government, and my proposed Bill has the support of the current Conservative Government. I thank the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport for its work, which has included engaging with the Scottish Government with a view to securing their support to reflect the fact that Scottish institutions are included in the list in the legislation.

There may still be potential claimants who are unaware of the location of artworks owned by relatives who died in the holocaust, so the moral case for this legislation remains as strong today as it was eight years ago. Indeed, the case is arguably stronger than it was in 2009. We have fewer and fewer holocaust survivors still with us. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to all the survivors who live in my Chipping Barnet constituency. I have had the great honour of meeting many of them during my years as their local MP. I thank them for all that they do to ensure that the current generation hears their testimony at first hand, as part of the efforts we must make as a society to ensure that the horrors of the holocaust are never forgotten.

Surely, it would be heartless and wrong to deprive the last survivors of their right to recover treasured works of art. Nothing can make up for the trauma and suffering of those who experienced the holocaust at first hand, or who lost loved ones in that horror, but at least we can give them back the precious works of art that were stolen from them. That is what my proposal is designed to achieve, and I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Theresa Villiers, Bob Blackman, Dr Matthew Offord, Stephen Crabb, Ian Austin, Mr Edward Vaizey, David Evennett, John Mann, Andrew Percy, Charlie Elphicke, Mr Iain Duncan Smith and Andrew Rosindell present the Bill.

Theresa Villiers accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 April, and to be printed (Bill 182).

Statutory Instruments (Motions to Annul)

UNIVERSAL CREDIT

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now come to the four motions on universal credit, children and young persons and social security, which will be debated together. I must inform the House that the Speaker has certified the two motions on children and young persons as relating exclusively to England, and as falling within devolved legislative competence. The motions relating to those statutory instruments are therefore subject to double majority voting, by the whole House and by Members representing constituencies in England. I should inform colleagues that this is a three-hour debate. It is very well subscribed; there are more than 40 Back Benchers wanting to speak. I hope that both Front Benchers and Back Benchers will bear that in mind.

2.55 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I beg to move,

That an humble address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Universal Credit (Miscellaneous Amendments Saving and Transitional Provision) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 65), dated 22 January, a copy of which was laid before this House on 22 January, be annulled.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following motions:

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Free School Lunches and Milk, and School and Early Years Finance (Amendments Relating to Universal Credit) (England) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 148), dated 6 February, a copy of which was laid before this House on 7 February, be annulled.

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Local Authority (Duty to Secure Early Years Provision Free of Charge) (Amendment) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 146), dated 6 February, a copy of which was laid before this House on 7 February, be annulled.

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Social Security (Contributions) (Amendment) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 120), dated 31 January, a copy of which was laid before this House on 1 February, be annulled.

Angela Rayner: I ask all Members of the House to bear in mind what Madam Deputy Speaker has said when they make interventions. I will try to be as brief as I possibly can.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), the shadow Chancellor, has said, this Tory Government have created a crisis on a scale that we have not seen before. Today, they did nothing to tackle it, and in these regulations they seek to make it even worse. If the House does not vote for our motions today, more than 1 million families will lose out. First, they will lose their free school meals.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree with Channel 4's FactCheck, which says:

"This is not a case of the government taking free school meals from a million children?"

These are children who are not currently receiving free school meals, and in fact the Government's proposals

would see 50,000 extra children receive free school meals. Perhaps the hon. Lady could stop giving inaccurate information to the House.

Angela Rayner: The hon. Gentleman should know that his Government have introduced transitional arrangements, and we are clear that under the transitional arrangements, those 1 million children would be entitled to free school meals. With the regulations, the Government are pulling the rug from under those hard-working families.

In my own boroughs of Oldham and Tameside, a total of 8,700 children growing up in poverty are set to miss out. In the Secretary of State's own area, the total is 6,500. So much for the light at the end of the tunnel that the Chancellor mentioned over the weekend on "The Andrew Marr Show"!

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that the Government did an assessment of the impact on childhood obesity prior to taking this statutory instrument through?

Angela Rayner: My hon. Friend makes an important point, because childhood obesity is an important issue at the moment. The Children's Society found that 1 million children growing up in poverty will lose out on free school meals that they would have been entitled to. Incredibly, the Government have the audacity to claim that they are being generous. They want to pretend that no families will lose because the small numbers who are benefiting under universal credit will not lose out now.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Is it not right that money should be placed where it is most needed? That is where we need the most support. When universal credit is fully rolled out, it is absolutely a fact that 50,000 more children will be getting free school meals. It is not right to mislead about this issue.

Angela Rayner: I am sure that the hon. Lady does not believe that I am trying to mislead the House. Let me be absolutely clear: many people, including MPs, wrongly believe that all children in poverty already get free school meals. That is not currently the case. But under the transitional protections under universal credit, those 1 million children would be entitled to the benefit. Through the secondary legislation, the Government are pulling the rug from underneath those families.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that this will make the working poor poorer and hit families deeply?

Angela Rayner: I am sure that my hon. Friend made an excellent point, but I am sorry to say that I did not quite catch it.

Mr Cunningham: Does my hon. Friend agree that this will make the working poor even poorer, in this day and age?

Angela Rayner: That is absolutely right—my hon. Friend did make a really important point. Those who currently get free school meals who were not part of

[Angela Rayner]

universal credit were in households on out-of-work benefits. If these regulations were to go through, the people on whom they would have the most detrimental effect would be those in work.

The current system would help more than 1 million more children than the plans we are voting on today. The former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), once wrote that universal credit

“will ensure that work always pays and is seen to pay”,

yet under these plans, universal credit will mean that work does not pay for hundreds of thousands of families. Those just above the threshold would be better off earning less.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): One of the biggest and most fundamental errors that the hon. Lady and her party are making is in their understanding of what transitional protection is about. I helped to design this, so let me inform her—[*Interruption.*] Perhaps Labour Members would like to listen as they might learn something. Transitional protection was designed to protect those moving from tax credits into universal credit so that they did not—if this would have happened to be the case—lose any money in the transition. It was not about increasing to the degree that she is talking about the numbers in receipt of free school meals. Under universal credit, more will receive free school meals than would have been the case under Labour’s plans.

Angela Rayner: The right hon. Gentleman acknowledges the fact that under the transitional protections many more in-work families would have received free school meals than will be the case under the Government’s secondary legislation. We hope that Conservative Members will help those hard-working families by ensuring that passported benefits do apply to them. We hope that they will help out those who are just about managing, which was what the Prime Minister claimed that she was going to do in the first place.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Some 27% of children in Lincoln live in poverty. Does my hon. Friend agree that this cliff-edge threshold might mean that some of those children might not get a hot meal one day?

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree about that. [*Interruption.*] Conservative Members keep saying that we are scaremongering, but it is absolute fact that under the transitional arrangements that currently apply, as they do in my constituency, which was one of the first to roll out UC, free school meals do cover those applicants who receive universal credit. The regulations will remove that right for those individuals, which is scandalous.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent opening statement. Does she agree that the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) almost makes her point for her? He made it clear that this is about making sure that people who are currently in receipt of benefits and free school meals would not be worse off

when they transition, in which case they are going to be worse off under these regulations—[*Interruption.*] He is making that case for her. For all the huff and puff from Conservative Members, one would have thought we would remember that this is about children and families who are living in poverty in work. We should be doing our utmost to help them, not having a semantic argument.

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

As I was saying, people should not just take our word for it. They should look at what the Children’s Society has said about those 1 million children who will not receive free school meals if the regulations come into force.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very persuasive case. In the Bradford district, more than 10,000 children who are living in poverty will miss out on free school meals, but Northern Ireland will be exempt from the same policy. Are not the Government putting their own political benefit before child poverty?

Angela Rayner: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, which I will come on to later in my contribution. As I said, those who are just above—

Chris Philp *rose*—

Angela Rayner: You have had your chance, thank you. As I said—[*Interruption.*] Hon. Members have been told that more than 40 people want to speak in this debate, and I am trying to give way as best I can. The hon. Gentleman has already intervened once; I think that was more than enough.

Those who are just above the threshold would be better off earning less under these proposals. The Government are pulling the rug from under their feet, because once they earn above £7,400, they will be about £400 a year worse off for each child they have in school. So just when did the Government abandon the principle that work should pay? Perhaps the Secretary of State can tell us why she will be voting for a policy that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) said, is twice as generous in Northern Ireland as it will be for her own constituents?

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): Does the hon. Lady agree that although the Conservative party talks about making work pay, it completely demolished that with universal credit through George Osborne’s removal of work allowances, meaning that now work does not pay?

Angela Rayner: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Universal credit has had add-ons and add-ons ever since the Government proposed it. That has made it very complex and, as I have outlined, work will not pay for some in receipt of it if these proposals go forward.

I would like to make a little more progress and address the issue of free childcare. Once again, the Government have a policy in transition—one that they are seeking to restrict. About 200,000 two-year-olds are currently eligible for 15 hours of free childcare, but there will be more than 400,000 two-year-olds in families receiving universal credit. Ministers have refused to say

how many children will be eligible under their policy, so will they finally do so now? I ask that because hundreds of thousands of children may lose out under their plans. Once again, some of the most vulnerable children are first in line for Government cuts.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): In this House, we all believe in an honest and balanced debate, so may we just hear from the hon. Lady that it is clear that 50,000 more children will be entitled to free school meals under universal credit than under the previous system, and that 7,000 more children will be entitled to the two-year-old free offer—it is more, not fewer?

Angela Rayner: The Government have plucked the 50,000 figure from their own consultation document, but it had no accompanying methodology, so I am not convinced. Indeed, that makes up less than 5% of those who are in poverty. The regulations would mean that those who would currently be eligible for support under the transitional protections this Government laid out for universal credit would have that rug pulled from under them—[*Interruption.*] Conservative Members can keep making faces, but those are the facts.

Once again, this creates a cliff edge for families in receipt of childcare, and the policy will squeeze the income of working families who are already struggling to get by. Under universal credit, they have to pay their childcare costs up front and then claim the money back. With childcare costs rising faster than wages, meeting these costs up front will make it impossible for many working families to make ends meet, so yet another barrier is put in their way. Only months ago, several Conservative Members asked the Chancellor to look again at the taper rate because it meant that work would not pay for low-income families. Today's vote is on exactly this issue. When the Government have already made those families bear the brunt of their cuts, adding yet another burden is just wrong.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way; she is being extremely generous with her time. The Labour party manifesto committed to extend free school meals to all primary school pupils. This is an additional extension of free school meals to a lot more children who are in secondary school. Will the hon. Lady please tell us how much that would cost and how her party would fund it if it was in power?

Angela Rayner: The hon. Gentleman will know that the "School Food Plan" that was published in July 2013 recommended that the Government looked into free school meals for infant and junior schools. The Labour party manifesto was clear that we would just extend that. It was unfortunate that the Government chose not to do as recommended, instead just giving it to infants. If Conservative Members would like to see our costings and manifesto, I am sure I could provide that, because there were many more costings in our manifesto than there were in the Conservative manifesto—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. This is an extremely important and very serious debate. The hon. Lady has taken a lot of interventions. When she takes interventions, there is no point in just

shouting at her; it is important to listen to her answer. The same will go for when the Secretary of State is speaking.

Angela Rayner: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Government are phasing out childcare vouchers as they transition to a policy of tax-free childcare, but that policy is simply not working. The introduction of tax-free childcare has been so shambolic that the Government fell 90% short of their take-up target, and spending was less than 5% of their projection. Instead, nearly £1 billion that was earmarked for childcare was returned to the Treasury. Yet the Government are still pushing ahead with their plan to phase out childcare vouchers, which will leave families hundreds of pounds worse off and directly transfer Government support to those who are better off.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): My hon. Friend may have seen written answers I have received from the Government showing that 10,000 of their own officials still use childcare vouchers, and the same number are signed up to a Ministry of Defence scheme. Does she agree that if Ministers will not protect their own officials, they should at least stand up for our armed forces?

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The armed forces do a magnificent job for us and it is an absolute scandal that they will also be caught up in this and made worse off as a result of these measures.

Members from all parties will know that hundreds of their constituents have written letters and signed petitions to express their concerns about these policy changes, yet the Government continue to push ahead with them, and have tried to do so by the stroke of a ministerial pen. The only legislation that has come to this House is the regulations before us, which complete the phase-out for those who change employers after April. We have therefore called for a vote on the regulations, and we want to make it clear that if the House passes our motion, we are sending a clear message to the Government that it is time to think again and keep childcare vouchers available.

The regulations on universal credit apply new sanctions to those who are currently protected and cut the time period that claimants have to provide evidence. Despite the Government's rhetoric on people with disabilities and mental health needs, it will be them who suffer. Charities have urged the Government to reconsider, with Mind saying that the regulations will

"make the system harder to navigate at a time when people are unwell and most in need of support."

Why is the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions ignoring those voices and making the system even harder for the very people the Government claim they want to support?

Self-employed people are the absolute bedrock of our economy. The Chancellor spoke of start-ups and new businesses in his statement earlier, but this legislation will make things harder for self-employed people. The TUC warns that a short start-up period for the minimum income floor could close businesses with the potential to become sustainable and profitable. The rules could discourage people from self-employment entirely. So, again, why is the Secretary of State making things so much harder for the people her Government claim

[Angela Rayner]

to support? We know that the self-employed are more likely to be on lower earnings than employees, yet in its recent welfare trends report, the Office for Budget Responsibility confirmed that the low-paid self-employed face a much tougher benefits system under universal credit. On average, those affected are set to lose around £3,000, so the savings seem to be coming from the pockets of the low-paid self-employed. Why is the Secretary of State pursuing a policy that will make so many self-employed people much worse off?

The regulations make the universal credit system even more complicated, with the introduction of the surplus earnings rule. As universal credit is based on the previous month's income, a self-employed claimant could get substantially less universal credit than an employed claimant earning a similar annual income. Successive Secretaries of State for Work and Pensions have said that universal credit will be simpler and will make work pay, but once again they are proposing the opposite.

All these statutory instruments share a common theme: they are about the support that we offer to families and their children, particularly those already struggling to get by. I remember when the Prime Minister said that the mission of her Government was the acronym JAMs—I am starting to think that really it stood for “Just about May's survival”. It was meant to be about those who are just about managing, yet under this Government, there will be JAMs today and there will still be JAMs tomorrow, because instead of helping them to get on and get by, the Government are making their lives ever harder. Today is a chance to say that enough is enough. I commend the motions to the House.

3.16 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): As the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) is on the Opposition Front Bench, may I start by congratulating her on her promotion? I am sure that she would have liked to have got it in happier circumstances, but none the less I welcome her to her role. I hope that she does not fall victim to the bullying culture of the Leader of the Opposition's office, as the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) has.

Well, well, well, what a strange old topsy-turvy world we find ourselves in. Measures so strongly fought for and won by claimants, MPs, stakeholders and charities only months ago are now being opposed by the Opposition. These changes were proposed by the most vocal defenders of benefits, and they are now being obstructed. We in the Chamber should not be giving the public misinformation, but unfortunately that is what has been happening so far.

Last month, stories emerged from Opposition Members—particularly the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner)—that have been repeated today: namely, that our plans for entitlement to free school meals would deprive more than a million children. It took a “Channel 4 News” FactCheck to point out that no child who currently receives meals would lose their entitlement and that, in fact, some 50,000 more children would benefit under our proposals when compared with the previous system.

I understand that it is the nature of the Opposition to oppose, but the scaremongering and misinformation from the Opposition has surely reached a new low as today they seek to annul regulations that consist largely of changes that were introduced purely to support benefits claimants—changes that Opposition Members have themselves called for. All this after a recent intervention by the UK Statistics Authority, which made it clear that the claims made by Opposition Members about universal credit causing poverty, debt and eviction were not supported by the evidence.

Of course, the scale and nature of the change represented by universal credit means that scrutiny is inevitable and important, and I welcome that, but unsubstantiated and exaggerated claims about widespread problems caused by universal credit amount to nothing less than scaremongering. They cause claimants alarm and, in the worst cases, stop them getting the money that they are entitled to, yet we find ourselves here again, debating universal credit, with the same false alarms coming from the shadow Cabinet—only this time we are debating the very regulations that we have designed to address the legitimate concerns of Opposition Members and our stakeholders.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The Secretary of State has said that claims should not be made when they are unsubstantiated. I have been asking parliamentary questions about the £50,000 increase that is in the consultation response, and I have received no facts about how the figure has been arrived at—none whatsoever. Will that be published, please?

Ms McVey: The numbers have been calculated and modelled by civil servants. These facts come from independent people and they can be relied on, unlike the facts that come from people who, as we have heard today, make it up as they go along.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend dispel some of the myths and scaremongering that have been put out by the Opposition and reassure my constituency, where universal credit is being fully rolled out, that those already in receipt of free school meals will not lose that eligibility?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is correct, and I thank her for adding that comment. She is right that that protection is afforded. In addition, as we go forward, more people will benefit from the measure.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ms McVey: I will carry on for a bit, and then I will gladly take some more interventions.

We are not just debating these regulations today, but trying to save them from the Opposition, who would be happy to destroy this extra support for our benefit claimants. Perhaps I should remind the House of some of the changes that are in these regulations and what benefits they will bring to claimants. After all, the policy underpinning these regulations has been widely debated and supported both inside and outside this Chamber. The regulations abolishing waiting days will help many claimants by, on average, £160, while reducing the time taken to receive the first monthly payment.

These regulations bring into effect the housing benefit transitional payment, which amounts to two weeks of housing benefit at the start of the claim. That is worth, on average, £233 towards helping claimants stay on top of their housing costs as they move into universal credit. These regulations increase the work allowances and are worth around £68 a year in further support for those who are striving to enter work.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Secretary of State is attempting to provide a stout defence of the impact of universal credit. Why is it then that, only last month, her colleagues on Stirling Council proposed three years' worth of mitigation against the impact of universal credit, worth more than half a million pounds?

Ms McVey: Actually, if the hon. Gentleman looks at what this Government introduced in the Budget, he will see that it was a package of support worth £1.5 billion for the country. What we are doing is supporting people as best we possibly can. Additionally, these regulations fund temporary accommodation through housing benefit, which has been widely called for and unanimously welcomed by local authorities.

These regulations follow on from a host of other changes that we have already implemented, including making our telephone lines Freephone numbers, extending the maximum repayment period for advances from six months to a year, increasing the maximum advance that claimants can receive to up to 100%, changing the guidance to ensure that, when private sector housing claimants come on to universal credit, we know whether their rent was previously paid directly to the landlord and can ensure that that continues.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): Meaner even than the master in Oliver Twist's workhouse, the Secretary of State seeks not just to stop the second helping, but to stop any meal at all. I ask her to come to Norfolk. If these changes go through, 12,500 children will be denied a hot midday meal. How does that square the circle in relation to making work pay? Please, can she tell us—anything?

Ms McVey: Unfortunately—I think that I was taught this as a child—when someone has totally lost the argument, they make up the facts, and that is what we are hearing from the Opposition. Although we have brought in all the requests that they wanted to support more people into work—I have just read out the list—they just scaremonger and make things up as they go along. I hope that it is clear to the whole House that these regulations will bring in real and tangible benefits for claimants and that, as promised, we are making the changes necessary to continue to deliver universal credit safely and securely, with all the necessary support that claimants need.

I want to be clear about another thing, too, because Members have stood up during past universal credit debates to recount stories of cases where their constituents have reported difficulties with universal credit. Where that has happened, we have immediately sought to address the concerns, because it is vital to us all that we get this right, so that we can deliver the most modern, forward-thinking, flexible benefit in the world, and that is what this Government are seeking to deliver.

This benefit will be at the cutting edge of support throughout the world—that is what this Government are delivering.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): On problems with universal credit, the Secretary of State will, I think, recognise that the last thing that families earning a bit less than £7,400 a year will want is a pay rise, because if they get it, they will immediately lose their free school meals and be much worse off as a result. That is a very serious problem for work incentives, which used to be a big priority for her Department. Does she recognise that major problem?

Ms McVey: The right hon. Gentleman raises a fair point that I would like to address. By contrast, the other points that we have heard so far have been fabrication. He mentioned people earning £7,400. Actually, with universal credit, we are talking about people who will be bringing home somewhere between £18,000 to £24,000. He is quite right—[*Interruption.*] If Members will kindly let me finish this answer to the very pertinent question asked by the right hon. Gentleman, as this is now a personalised benefit where people will have their own work coaches, we will not seek to put someone in a less advantageous situation. Therefore, if people look at the money that is coming in and the extra support that is coming from school meals, they can see that we will not seek to do that to an individual. A work coach will be working with individuals to help them to progress in work, so that they are in a better situation.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): On work incentives, can the Secretary of State confirm that there have been two studies—one in December 2015 and another in September 2017—both of which showed that people on universal credit were more likely to get back into work than those people on the predecessor benefits? Therefore, this is helping to get people back into work.

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is quite correct. Further studies show that people on universal credit are much more likely to look for work than people on jobseeker's allowance—86% of those on universal credit, compared to 34% of those on jobseeker's allowance. Under the legacy benefits came things that I am sure we all remember, such as the 16-hour rule, which trapped people on benefits. That will not happen under universal credit because it pays people to work, every hour that they work.

Mr Duncan Smith: My right hon. Friend is doing a fantastic job. She has pointed out the absurdity of the Opposition's position, whereby they will now vote against the changes that will benefit those who most need them. Alongside that, they are now voting for a policy that would deliver free schools meals to families earning £40,000 a year. Does not she think that the Opposition are for the few, not for the many?

Ms McVey: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point. Perhaps these are honest mistakes by the Opposition; I am not sure. Under universal credit, people can be in work and not in work. Perhaps the Opposition do not understand the complexities of this system, which is helping people into work and then to progress at work. As my right hon. Friend said, if we allowed free school meals in every family on universal credit, those families

[Ms McVey]

could include parents earning £40,000 a year. As has always been the case, we support people on free school meals from families who are either not in work or in low amounts of work.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Again, can we listen to the Secretary of State? It is fine if she wants to take interventions and she has indicated that she will take some more, but I do think that hon. Members should be a bit calmer.

Ms McVey: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately).

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Jobcentres in my constituency tell me with some passion that universal credit is really helping them to get more people into work. The Government have also listened to concerns about universal credit and are making improvements. Does it not baffle the Secretary of State and is it not bizarre that the Labour party is trying to block those improvements, when the Government are doing exactly the right thing?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is spot on, and the incredulity with which she says what the Opposition are stopping points out the ridiculousness of their position. Not only have we helped an extra 3.1 million people into work, but these regulations help the most vulnerable and will bring in an extra £1.5 billion of support.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Ms McVey: I will carry on for a little bit more before taking more interventions from Opposition Members.

I turn to the Free School Lunches and Milk, and School and Early Years Finance (Amendments Relating to Universal Credit) (England) Regulations 2018. The Government have recently published their responses to two consultations on the earnings thresholds to receive free school meals under universal credit. The scope of these consultations includes entitlement to free school meals, the early years pupil premium and free early education provision for two-year-olds. The intention of these regulations is to replace the transitional criteria introduced in 2013. These transitional measures made all families on universal credit eligible for these entitlements—a move that was necessary so that no household should lose out during the early stages of the universal credit roll-out. Having fully considered all the responses to the consultation, the Department for Education laid these regulations before the House on 7 February to replace the temporary criteria with the new earnings threshold. This is what much of the debate has centred on so far. I hope that we have given clarity and the Opposition now understand why accepting these regulations would be so helpful to their constituents.

Catherine West: This change to benefits shows how untrusted the Government are on benefits. If they are trying to sell something good, they cannot, because they are so untrusted on benefits. If the system is so fantastic, why do 80% of people who come to see MPs

get their benefits? Why should not the system just work? [HON. MEMBERS: “What?”] Some 80% of appeals for universal credit—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I help a little bit? Would hon. Members make short interventions? I want to ensure that all Members get in. The sooner we get this speech over, the sooner we can get to the Back Benches.

Ms McVey: It would be helpful if hon. Members did not just make up statistics and facts as they went along, as we just heard from the hon. Lady. Hon. Members should listen to us regarding the support that we are now providing to claimants. As I said, it is a topsy-turvy world. There was a ding-dong when the Opposition were calling for the changes. Now that we are introducing the changes, we are back to another ding-dong and they do not want the changes—but never mind.

I turn to the regulations concerning national insurance contributions and childcare. These regulations align the tax and national insurance treatment of employer-supported childcare, where parents opt into the new tax-free childcare scheme. They remove the national insurance disregard to new entrants to the scheme, once the relevant day has been set. They are vital to ensure that the tax system operates fairly and consistently and that the Government can target their childcare support effectively.

For many parents, being able to afford good-quality childcare is essential for them to work and support their families. That is why we are replacing the childcare vouchers with tax-free childcare, which is a fairer and better-targeted system. Tax-free childcare is now open to all eligible parents, who can get up to £2,000 per child per year to help towards their childcare costs. More families will be able to access support through tax-free childcare because only about half of employed working parents can access vouchers, and self-employed parents were excluded from vouchers. Therefore, 1.5 million families are now eligible for tax-free childcare compared with about 600,000 families currently benefiting from vouchers.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): Will the Secretary of State clarify something she said in relation to people getting pay increases that then perversely lead to them being worse off? She appeared to say that she would instruct personal trainers to put that right financially. I can hear a shudder going around benefits offices up and down the country at the idea that she has unilaterally said that if any constituent of ours faces being worse off as a consequence of a pay rise, perversely, her personal trainers will compensate them for that loss.

Ms McVey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, because it allows me to explain that universal credit works on a tailor-made basis, so that the claimant will always be in contact with their work coaches to work out what is better, how progression would be better and why they would be taking reasonable work because it makes them better off. I am not saying this unilaterally. I ask all Opposition Members please to go to their local jobcentre and meet the work coaches, who can then explain how the system works.

In 2013, the Government announced the introduction of tax-free childcare as the successor to childcare vouchers. The passing of the Children and Families Act 2014,

which legislated for tax-free childcare, had cross-party support. Tax-free childcare is now fully rolled out, and the date for the closure of the voucher scheme to new entrants is April this year. This was set out in the 2016 Budget, giving two years' notice. Parents receiving childcare vouchers can continue to use them while their current employer continues to offer the scheme.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): Is not the bottom line that under the previous tax credits system people got 75% of their childcare costs but under universal credit they get 85% of their childcare costs, and they can work all the hours that they want to?

Ms McVey: Universal credit is far more generous, as my hon. Friend points out. Up to 85% of childcare costs will be given to people who need it.

Under the childcare voucher scheme, the estimated cost to the Exchequer of forgone employers' national insurance contributions is £220 million per year. This is paid to employers and voucher providers to administer the schemes, so it is not surprising that voucher providers are lobbying hard to keep the scheme open. However, we are focused on delivering a better childcare offer for working families. Tax-free childcare is simpler to administer for childcare providers, who will not have to deal with multiple voucher providers. These regulations will bring the national insurance contributions relief in line with the income tax treatment. They are an essential step in reforming Government childcare support to provide a fair and well-targeted system. Closing the childcare voucher scheme to new entrants will ensure that more Government support goes directly to parents and helps working families to reduce their childcare costs.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): With the consultation that the Government are carrying out on abuse of women, does the Secretary of State recognise the threat of financial control and abuse posed to women by the single payment? Would she be willing to consider making individual payments of child tax credits to the mother, and so on, the norm? Charities have demonstrated that women who are being abused will not apply for exception because they feel they will come under physical abuse.

Ms McVey: The hon. Lady makes a good point, and that is why it is possible to split payments according to need. The devolved Administration in Scotland have the right to alter these rules and provide extra support, should they wish to, but it is safe to say that payments can now be split, and we have listened to those concerns.

We are also listening to colleagues in Northern Ireland, who have raised specific circumstances relating to certain public sector service employers, and have committed to ongoing engagement with them to look at these issues, as tax-free childcare continues to roll out to replace employer-supported childcare. We have seen the success of 30 hours' free childcare for three and four-year-olds in England, so we are committed to working with the Northern Ireland parties to administer childcare support of that kind in Northern Ireland, in the absence of an Executive.

For the reasons I have set out, annulling these regulations would deprive families and their children of the important

and positive support that this Government are determined to offer and would have a range of very negative effects, so I call upon the House to oppose the motions.

3.41 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to these motions for the Scottish National party. I will use the bulk of my time on early-day motions 1004 and 921, as motions two relate only to England or England and Wales.

The universal credit regulations referred to in early-day motion 921 cover most of what was announced in the Chancellor's autumn Budget, after months of negative headlines for the Government about universal credit. It was the Government's big sell to their concerned Back Benchers, which was really not much. For instance, they reduced the waiting time before universal credit can be paid to recipients from six weeks to five, which was a welcome but very wee step.

Meanwhile, the Government also included more controversial measures such as changes to the rules on surplus earnings and self-employment losses, which come into force next month. They removed the automatic temporary exemption from work search and availability requirements for illness for claimants who have been found fit for work, and they reduced the time people have to register and supply evidence regarding a change in their circumstances from one month to 14 days.

The Government's tweaks to the welfare system over the last eight years and the drip, drip, drip of cuts are slowly eroding the value and support it provides. It is completely unfair to expect people on low incomes to cope with the fact that their benefit will be frozen and fail to meet their costs of living, while the Government continue to add layers of punitive bureaucracy designed to trip them up. An individual financial sanction or one person missing the deadline for an increase in entitlement is of tiny financial value to the Department for Work and Pensions, but it is proportionally an enormous chunk of that person's income. Yet this Government seem content to make these changes off the cuff, in the same way they tweaked the universal credit work allowance, which eroded its value, and the same way they tried to tweak personal independence payments, to stop people with severe mental health problems receiving the higher rate. It is underhand, and it is appalling.

I received an official warning recently that universal credit will be rolled out in my constituency next month. I have been working closely with my local citizens advice bureau to make sure there is a joined-up response to the issues as they unfold, as it has done in many Members' constituencies. I am worried about the impact that the roll-out of universal credit will have on local employers and their employees, because the picture elsewhere has been disastrous. The continued roll-out of universal credit is having a devastating impact on claimants, with debt and rent arrears through the roof.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is speaking about the roll-out of universal credit. We had the roll-out in Redditch just a few months ago. I can assure him that, according to the manager of the jobcentre, who has worked there for 30 years—an independent person working day in, day out to help people—the roll-out is much better than any previous system. Maybe he would like to visit Redditch and speak to her.

Neil Gray: I have no reason to doubt what the hon. Lady says, except that the experiences of Members on the Opposition Benches are rather different. I point her and her colleagues to my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), who has been working tirelessly on this not only while he has been a Member of the House but while he was leader of Highland Council, when universal credit was first tested in Highland. He has been knocking against a brick wall trying to get the DWP to listen to the concerns that he has found in his area, and his experience is not the same as the one the hon. Lady says she has had in Redditch.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I intervene in response to the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who said how wonderful jobcentres are and how much work they do. I do not know whether she has had the same experience as me, but in my city of Glasgow, the UK Government have closed six jobcentres, and in my area of the east end of Glasgow, they have just butchered three out of four jobcentres. How can we go and find out how things are going in jobcentres, when her Government are busy closing them?

Neil Gray: I absolutely concur with my hon. Friend, who has been an assiduous campaigner to protect and save the jobcentres in his constituency. Even at this late stage and after some of their doors have closed, I hope that the Government may listen and finally provide a reprieve.

It is right that we acknowledge the knock-on effect felt by landlords, whose incomes are in turn being squeezed due to tenants falling into arrears because of successive cuts to universal credit. The SNP has continually called for the roll-out of universal credit to be paused and properly fixed. That is not just about reducing the wait time by a week for those receiving universal credit, but about restoring the original principles of universal credit, which have been cut back so far to their roots that they have been battered.

The UK Government's woeful ignorance on this is shameful. The evidence of the social destruction caused by universal credit in its current form is clear from report after report by expert charities. Such social destruction is not masked by the line, repeated ad nauseam by the Government, that universal credit is getting people into work. It is not much good for people if this is just a shift from out-of-work poverty to in-work poverty. We know there has been a rise in the rate of in-work poverty, and we also know that 67% of children—I repeat, 67% of children—currently living in poverty do so in a family where at least one person works.

Catherine West: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that most housing providers have deep concerns about universal credit in general, and in particular about direct payments to tenants who have problems with such a relationship?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I just warn Members that we will have to have a five-minute limit. I do not want to start off with a four-minute limit, but we are in danger of going that way.

Neil Gray: I agree with the hon. Lady, which is why we are looking to introduce some flexibilities in Scotland, where we have the minimal powers to do so.

The Government must open their eyes to the crisis that they have created for workers, people who are sick or disabled, landlords and tenants, and employers, and urgently halt and fix universal credit before any more of our constituents have to suffer. In Scotland, the Scottish Government are using some of their minimal new powers in this area to give people in Scotland more choice over the universal credit payments and enable them to manage their household budgets better. We of course want to do more, and we wish that the whole of universal credit had been devolved to allow us to do so.

Dr Whitford: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Secretary of State's suggestion that women can apply for the exceptional alternative payment scheme is not enough? The evidence shows that this needs to be the norm.

Neil Gray: I fully agree with my hon. Friend. Again, I hope that the Government are looking at her private Member's Bill, which is due to be given a Second Reading on Friday, and that they will do what is right and is needed so that all areas of these isles can bring about the changes that are required.

Turning now to early-day motion 1004 on the changes to national insurance contributions that come into force on 6 April, much of the comment in this area has been not about the regulations themselves, but about a policy underpinning one of the changes. That policy is the UK Government's decision to introduce a new scheme to support parents' childcare costs—tax-free childcare—and to close employer-supported childcare schemes to new applicants from April 2018. Parents will not be able to receive support simultaneously from both the current scheme and the new tax-free childcare scheme, but parents who wish to remain in the old childcare vouchers scheme will be able to do so while the current employer continues to offer such a scheme. There is no obligation to switch to the new scheme, but existing voucher schemes will be closed to new applicants from next month.

The delivery of affordable childcare is crucial for the development of children as well as for providing for families. Fundamental to that is that parents on low incomes need to be protected from the impact of enormous childcare costs. That is one of the major barriers to resolving the gender pay gap and the gender employment gap. Childcare continues to be expensive and inflexible.

We are deeply concerned about the UK Government's plans to close the childcare voucher scheme to new entrants from April this year. The SNP wishes to support policies that deliver for parents, ensuring that they have the resources and flexibility they need to give their children the best start in life. The UK Government must support working parents by keeping the scheme going, alongside the tax-free childcare scheme, so that parents can choose what is most suitable for their needs and offers the most support for their family. We must also consider in more detail the impact that the introduction of tax-free childcare will have across all different family types.

One of the key problems is that this is an extremely complex area, and the interaction of two schemes with the benefits system is an additional layer of complicated bureaucracy for parents. For example, the Low Incomes Tax Reform Group highlighted in February that universal credit and tax credit claimants must seek advice before applying for tax-free childcare:

“If an existing tax credit claimant makes a claim for TFC, even if they do not claim any help with childcare costs through tax credits, their whole tax credit claim will be automatically terminated. If they live in an area where universal credit full service has rolled out they may find that they are not able to claim tax credits again and this is very confusing.”

That is a significant issue with the new scheme, so how are the Government making people aware of it? We know that the DWP is notoriously bad at awareness campaigns, as we have seen with the WASPI women—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—or the massively under-marketed Access to Work programme. We also know that the UK Government’s benefit changes are already creating confusion for people. Figures from the Government Digital Service have revealed that claimants appear to be encountering significant problems with the Government’s Verify system for universal credit, with 48 out of 91 needing help at a jobcentre to set up an account.

In Scotland, the SNP Government have committed to almost doubling the funded early learning and childcare entitlement by 2020, from 600 to 1,140 hours, in a bid to transform the life chances of children in Scotland. Our universal childcare offer is unmatched in the rest of the UK. In Scotland, all three and four-year-olds, and eligible two-year-olds, will benefit from 1,140 hours. The full entitlement is estimated to save families over £350 per child per month, or £4,500 a year.

Before I conclude, I would like to touch briefly on the other two motions, which relate to devolved matters. On the free school lunches and milk motion, every child at a local council school in Scotland can get free school lunches in primary 1, 2 and 3, regardless of financial circumstances. Some children in funded childcare before starting school can also get free meals. That is a year more than is currently provided in England. The UK Government’s universal credit system requires arbitrary thresholds, which create a cliff edge for parents, as has been discussed. We continue to call on the UK Government to devolve powers and funding so that we can take control of universal credit in its entirety in Scotland and deliver it in the best way possible for the people of Scotland.

Finally, on the free childcare motion, we have committed to fully funding our transformative expansion of early learning and childcare entitlement to 1,140 hours by 2020, and we have a track record of delivering on the previous expansion from 475 hours to 600 hours.

In conclusion, in all these areas what is clear is that when issues are devolved we see better policy and better outcomes for the people of Scotland.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. There is now a five-minute limit on speeches.

3.53 pm

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I welcome the universal credit regulations that the House is considering. We should not forget that universal credit is an important reform that is getting more people back into work and helping them to stay in work. People are getting help and support from DWP staff that they did not get in the past.

I think that a mark of the policy is the enthusiasm shown by jobcentre staff. I had the privilege of visiting my local jobcentre in 2014—I have visited it since, of course—alongside my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith). That day they were holding a regional training conference for up-and-coming leaders, and when we walked into their training room, which was full of civil servants, they all immediately started applauding my right hon. Friend. That showed me that they do not owe any Government anything, in terms of support or loyalty. It showed me that they think the reforms that he was introducing, and that the Government are now rolling out, are worth doing. Having visited the people who work in jobcentres, and having spoken to them since, it is clear to me that they think that the reforms are now making a real and positive difference.

I will not say that the roll-out of universal credit has been without challenges. We all know it has, which is why the Government are putting forward this package today worth £1.5 billion. We should also acknowledge that if the package is voted down, people who need help might not be able to receive their advance within five weeks or get the extra six months to repay any advance, and they might have to go back to seven weeks of waiting time while their claim is processed. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State also raised the possibility of people being in a worse position with regard to housing benefit. The House therefore needs to think very carefully before voting down these regulations, which are positive and are what Opposition Members wanted just a few months ago.

On free school meals, it is important to point out that the regulations we are debating today do not change the entitlement for year 1 and 2 children, all of whom receive free school meals. We also need to be careful with the figure of 1 million children losing out. As soon as I heard that figure—on that same afternoon—I accosted the Education Minister during a vote to ask him whether it was true. He said clearly that it was not true, so we need to look at the facts.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My hon. Friend will recognise that the Opposition’s proposal on free school meals in their manifesto was to pay for them by charging VAT on private schools, which is illegal under EU law. Does my hon. Friend find it confusing that they would prefer to stay in the single market and the customs union, when that would be at odds with that policy?

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend demonstrates the complete confusion and disarray of the Opposition, not just on this policy but on our future outside the European Union. That goes to the heart of the situation: this is all about political dogma, rather than practical ideas and practical help for people.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman think that the Children’s Society’s figure of 16,500 children being denied free school meals in the county of Cheshire, which the Secretary of State and I represent, is political dogma?

Mr Jones: The new system is more generous than the old system. I will come on to the external evidence that explains that in a moment.

[Mr Marcus Jones]

Returning to what I was saying about free school meals, under the old system of jobseeker's allowance as soon as a parent worked 16 hours, or two parents worked 24 hours, they lost their children's entitlement to free school meals. The crux of this debate is comparing and contrasting that with what we are moving to. All those currently in the system have been eligible, because of transitional arrangements. Conservative Members have made it clear why the transitional arrangements were put in place. Under the new system, when everybody is on universal credit and these regulations are in place, by 2022 an additional 50,000 children will be eligible for free school meals. I hear all the noise from Opposition Members, but they should not just take my word for it or that of other Conservative Members. They should go on to the "Channel 4 News" FactCheck website, which says:

"This is not a case of the government taking free school meals from a million children who are currently receiving them. It's about comparing two future, hypothetical scenarios."

Both of them are more generous than the old benefits system.

The Labour party frequently looks for us to improve the situation and the lives of the most vulnerable. That is what this policy and these regulations are doing today, but unfortunately, Labour seems not to let the truth and the facts get in the way of a good story. There is too much political dogma and it is putting that before people. The Government are putting people first. This system will be better than the system was hitherto and that is why I will support the Government tonight.

4.1 pm

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): The measures that we are debating expose what has been happening to our country since 2010. In the name of deficit reduction and fiscal responsibility, the Tories have allowed the poorest and most vulnerable to become poorer and even more vulnerable. A Prime Minister who once courageously warned her own party that it was perceived by too many as the nasty party is presiding over a Government who have a cavalier disregard for social justice and the poverty that shames our country.

It is true that in the aftermath of a global financial crisis, any UK Government would have had to make tough choices, striking the right balance between spending cuts, tax increases and investment in growth. However, the reality is that too often they have made the wrong choices—choices motivated by an ideological project to wither the state, irrespective of its impact on local communities, the poorest in our society and growth.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Could the hon. Gentleman just remind us all that a note had been left by a member of his Government that said, quite properly, there was no money left? Not only have this Government restored our economy, but in so doing they have absolutely protected the very people that matter to all of us. This is tribal nonsense.

Mr Lewis: I have a lot of respect for the right hon. Lady, but to claim that the financial crisis was anything other than a consequence of a crash that started on Wall Street is the biggest distortion of history that we listen to in this country.

Anna Soubry: The hon. Gentleman is rewriting history. The fact is that if the Labour Government had fixed the roof when the sun was shining, when that crisis came along they could have weathered the storm. That is what this responsible Government have been doing since 2010.

Mr Lewis: The right hon. Lady's party wanted us to regulate the banks and the financial services sector less than under the regulatory system we had in place. It committed to matching our spending and borrowing and did not want us to rescue the banks. Imagine if that prescription had been followed at the time we were dealing with the financial crisis.

The Government's choices are motivated by an ideological project to wither the state, irrespective of its impact. Their disproportionate cuts have choked off growth and destroyed too much of our social fabric. Their tax changes have failed dismally to tackle tax avoidance or to ensure that, in tough times, those with the most carry the greatest burden. Their failure to invest in infrastructure, skills and jobs has led to economic growth that is anaemic compared with similar economies. The Government's own assessments predict that this economic failure will be made even worse by the uncertainty and instability that are the inevitable consequences of Brexit.

Perhaps the right hon. Lady will agree with me on this point: history will record that the referendum was nothing to do with the national interest or giving voice to the will of the people. It was David Cameron's fix for managing the Tory party through a general election.

Anna Soubry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Lewis: I am not giving way again to the right hon. Lady. Far from being the party of economic competence, hers is the party of economic chaos.

To be clear, the policies we are opposing today are neither necessary nor acceptable in a civilised society; they are political choices made by this Tory Government. As we have heard in this debate, Tory Members are in denial. Too many of our fellow citizens might as well be living in a different country from the one they describe. The reality for those people is food banks, perpetual debt, a poor quality of life and a lack of hope for themselves and their children. Some, of course, are dependent on benefits, but increasing numbers are people in work on permanent low pay and insecure contracts. This should offend any Member who believes not only in social justice but in the future of mainstream politics. Here and abroad, people who feel left behind by mainstream politics are increasingly turning to anti-establishment nationalism, which spreads hate and division. That is another reason these policies are so irresponsible.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): A few moments ago, the hon. Gentleman denigrated Brexit, yet his own area of Bury voted to leave the EU. How would that have helped with the politics of disenfranchising people and making them turn towards extremes?

Mr Lewis: The hon. Gentleman entirely misses the point. Of course I believe that the result of the referendum must be respected; I question the motive for the referendum

in the first place. It was David Cameron's folly—that is how history will remember him—and was done in the interests of the Conservative party, not those of our country.

Anna Soubry: I too have respect—some—for the hon. Gentleman, although it is beginning to wane. I do not want to fall out with him, but I would make one point to him. It is not good enough just to blame it all on David Cameron. The hon. Gentleman, like me and the majority of people in the House, walked through the Lobbies in support of a referendum, and we are now dealing with the consequences. We were all complicit in agreeing that the British people should vote and determine whether we stayed or left.

Mr Lewis: I simply say—I think that history will bear this out—that it was done purely to keep the Conservative party together and to get through a general election. It had nothing to do with the national interest and everything to do with the arrogance of the then Prime Minister and Chancellor in believing that they would almost inevitably win such a referendum.

I will turn now to the measures on universal credit and free school meals. The Government could hardly have made more of a mess of universal credit. The National Audit Office stated that the project had suffered from “weak management, ineffective control and poor governance”.

Is that the responsibility of the current Secretary of State or her predecessor? Perhaps she would like to respond—no? Okay. Cuts to universal credit passed in the last two years have left a majority of families worse off on universal credit than under the system it replaces, and this further reduction in support will add to their financial pain. The proposed threshold could have a negative effect on work incentives and risks creating poverty traps for families on universal credit, which goes completely against the Government's goal that universal credit should always reward work.

In the 1980s, Tory policies created a deeply divided society. They have learnt nothing from history and are once again fuelling a cycle of intergenerational deprivation that hurts those most affected but which in the end damages us all. I hope the House will today force the Government to rethink these regressive measures.

4.8 pm

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I do not approach the matters in the statutory instruments lightly, and I will tell hon. Members why. I was brought up by a single parent who was widowed a month before I was born, who worked shifts in a factory and who got by on a widow's pension, child benefit and the money she made and by managing that money carefully, so I know only too well the impact that such changes can have. But I also know that people in those situations are acutely concerned about changes coming down the line and the alarmist things being said currently. I appeal to the Opposition, particularly the Front-Bench team, to think of those people when they make alarmist statements. By all means have legitimate, fair and open debate, but do not trot out numbers that are simply not true; do not let people believe that something as precious as free school meals is being taken away from them when that is not the case. I ask those on our Front Bench whether these changes remotely resemble what has been proposed

by Labour Front Benchers. They are not changes that I could support, but they are nothing like what Labour is proposing.

I thank the Secretary of State for Education for his letter outlining the Government's position on free school meals. In it, he states:

“The proposed changes to the eligibility criteria have been designed to ensure that support is targeted where it is needed most, meaning that those on the lowest incomes remain the focus of Free School Meals...”

No child will lose their meals during the rollout of Universal credit as a result of these changes.

Our plans mean an extra 50,000 children will be eligible for a nutritious meal at school by 2022.

Labour's claim that our changes could leave over a million children without this is deliberately misleading.”

As I have said, there are people out there in the real world who think that something will be taken from them and their children, which causes them concern and alarm. I question whether there is a deliberate attempt to weaponise the vulnerable, just as people once boasted about the NHS being weaponised in order to rig votes. I urge Members not to do that, because they will cause fear and anxiety where it is not required. There is enough fear and anxiety in those households as it is.

The letter continues:

“Since 2010, we have extended the availability for free school meals to disadvantaged students in further education and introduced universal infant free school meals.

When Universal Credit was introduced, the Government were clear that they would set a new criteria for free school meals. To ensure that no one was adversely affected during its roll out, the Government temporarily made Universal Credit a qualifying benefit for Free School Meals, regardless of income. As was made clear at the time, this was always an interim measure...

If you receive a free school meal now—you will continue to do so until the end of the rollout of Universal Credit, planned for 2022, and then to the end of either primary or secondary school (which ever you are in at this point).

For example a child in year 5 on a FSM now, whose parents are on UC but have an income of £40,000, will continue to get a FSM until the end of secondary school.”

I know that many colleagues want to take part in the debate, but I particularly want to thank the Government Front Bench for a robust defence of an important policy. Let us nail the myths, the untruths and the attempts to frighten people. If the Labour party continues to peddle things that are untrue, it behoves us to state what is true and not to frighten the vulnerable, many of whom we are all proud to represent.

4.13 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I have been raising these issues in the Chamber for a number of years. Why is that? First, those we are talking about today, whether they are above or below the arbitrary thresholds that the Government are setting, are by their nature very low-income families who are struggling every day to get by. Secondly, the whole point of universal credit was to remove cliff edges from the system, so that once people reached a certain point they would not suddenly lose a number of benefits that make quite a significant difference to a “just about managing” family. Those arbitrary thresholds are taking away the very principles of that position.

I recently spoke to a number of parents in Moss Side, in my constituency, about their predicament. Those who had lost free school meals described acutely what it

[Lucy Powell]

meant to them. Some had two, three or four children, which meant that they were losing £10 or £11 a week per child. Moreover, they were losing bus passes, the entitlement to free school uniforms and the entitlement to free school trips. What were they doing? They were not going to pay that £10 or £11 to the school for free school meals, so most of them were sending their children to school with white-bread jam sandwiches to last them for the entire day. That is not something I want to see happening in my constituency.

The need of these families has not changed; they are still on the breadline—they might be just above it, but they are still absolutely operating on the breadline. The impact of losing the two-year-old offer for these families could mean that about £54 a week is suddenly gone because of this cliff-edge. For those with children aged two this is particularly pernicious, because we are probably talking about young mums who are re-entering the labour market for the first time, and we are disincentivising them from working. The real problem with the Government's policy is that it breaks the principle of universal credit: it is putting into the system disincentives to work more or take on higher paid work for, by their definition, low income, just-about-managing families.

My wider point is about the impact of these policies on social mobility and supporting these families to get on in life. The mothers I spoke to in Moss Side also had the school headteacher there, and she told me about the impact of the loss of free school meals on her school budget. This is a single-form entry primary school in Moss Side where the needs of the community are the same today as they have ever been. About 25 out of 30 children in year 6 are on free school meals, and coming in from nursery are about four or five; that is because of changes already coming in. We must remember that this has a huge impact on school budgets as well, because of the loss of the pupil premium.

I want to talk particularly about the developmental gap at the age of five and the impact of this particularly stringent new threshold on receiving the two-year-old offer. I fully supported the Government in bringing in the two-year-old offer for disadvantaged families, and we know from the evaluation that where that is given in a quality setting it can transform the life chances of those children, so surely we should be debating how we can extend that provision for more disadvantaged families, not reducing it.

Analysis I produced last year showed that many of the tax-free childcare offers and the three and four-year-old offer coming in disproportionately benefit better-off families: 75% of that extra money going into tax-free offers, and the three and four-year-old offer will go to the top 50% of earners in this country. Lower-income families and those on universal credit will reap very little benefit from these other offers. We are therefore going to see lack of social mobility getting entrenched, not being addressed.

I will leave everybody with the words of the Prime Minister, who said that to

“build a great meritocracy in Britain, we need to broaden our perspective and do more for the hidden disadvantaged”.

These new measures will narrow the current provisions, not broaden them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The time limit is now four minutes.

4.18 pm

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): We are debating a number of important statutory instruments, and in the light of the time constraints, I will confine my comments to the measures relating to free school meals.

The benefits of free school meals for those who need them have been set out today and in the past. While it is absolutely right that we debate these new eligibility criteria for free school meals, although it is disappointing that there are no Liberal Democrats in the Chamber, it is also right that we do so with a focus on facts, not inaccurate claims—the Secretary of State made the position clear—that these proposals take away free school meals from children. In fact, as has been set out, it is estimated that by 2022, under the new regulations, about 50,000 more children—more, not fewer—will benefit from a free school meal than under the previous benefit system.

The approach in these regulations not only extends support to more children, but ensures, as my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) made clear, that we target that support at those who most need it and where it will have the greatest impact in changing lives. As he also set out, the Government have always been open and clear that when universal credit was rolled out, there would be new criteria, but that no child currently on free school meals would lose out until 2022, and that those in either primary or secondary school would continue to benefit while in that school.

Much is being made of claims that 1 million children will have free school meals taken from them, but that is simply not accurate. I am not usually one to cite “Channel 4 News”, but on this occasion, like my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), I will quote its FactCheck verdict, which reads:

“This is not a case of the government taking free school meals from a million children who are currently receiving them. It's about comparing two future, hypothetical scenarios, one of which is more generous than the other.”

Both of them are more generous than the old benefits system.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Edward Argar: I will not, because I am conscious of the time.

An issue such as this, which is of real importance to many people, quite rightly excites strong passions and strong arguments, but it is important that we stick to the facts. An Opposition who are unable to muster coherent arguments against actual Government policy are instead taking issue with hypothetical Government policy and scenarios. I am committed to ensuring that disadvantaged young people can get a free nutritious meal at school, and I am sure that that is true of all colleagues on both sides of the House, regardless of where they stand on these two hypothetical scenarios. These measures mean that more people will be able to

get free school meals than at present, which is why I will be voting with the Government to extend the eligibility for free school meals.

4.21 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): These regulations will affect millions of families up and down the country, so it is only right that we are able to discuss them today. The Government consulted from November to January on introducing an earnings threshold that would restrict free school meals to families with net earnings under £7,400 per annum. The consultation received 8,981 responses. However, the Government excluded 8,421 of those responses from their analysis, meaning that fewer than 4% of respondents agreed with the Government. Surely that goes against every rule of public consultations. Talk about statistics being used against vulnerable people!

In 2010, the then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions promised in the White Paper on universal credit that it would

“ensure that work always pays and is seen to pay. Universal Credit will mean that people will be consistently and transparently better off for each hour they work and every pound they earn.”

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am glad that my hon. Friend has picked out that point. She will have heard the Secretary of State saying that jobcentres would advise people not to take extra work or to get a pay rise because they would end up worse off. Is that not absolutely contrary to the whole principle of universal credit that she has just read out?

Mrs Hodgson: Yes, absolutely. We know that the Government are today reneging on the former Secretary of State's commitment.

Free school meals are worth far more to a family than £400 a year per child. That might not seem to be a lot to some hon. Members, but to those families it is an absolute lifeline. By introducing a £7,400 threshold for eligibility, the Government are forcibly creating a cliff edge that will be detrimental to families, especially children. To give just one example, someone with three children in their family who earns just below the £7,400 threshold is set to lose out on £1,200-worth of free school meals if they work only a few extra hours or get a pay rise. The Opposition's proposal would simply remove the huge cliff edge and the work disincentive for families who most need support. It would take away the barrier to working extra hours or seeking promotion. Our proposals would therefore make work pay. The Government's proposal is in fact the new 16 hours, which they said was a disincentive.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that in Hartlepool, where universal credit is not being rolled out—it is already in—more than 1,000 children are being denied free school meals on the basis of the new proposal?

Mrs Hodgson: Yes. We can all cite the numbers from our constituencies. Even Conservative Members need to think about what they are doing to some of the poorest children in their constituencies. In the example I just quoted, the family's annual wages would need to increase from £7,400 to almost £11,000 to make up for

what they would lose by rising above the eligibility cliff edge. That problem did not occur under the old tax credit system, because that provided an offsetting income boost at the point at which free school meals were withdrawn. However, there is no equivalent mitigation under universal credit.

The Children's Society has been much maligned today and has been cited as giving duff statistics—Conservative Members should be ashamed of themselves. It estimates that the cliff edge will mean that a million children in poverty will miss out on free school meals once universal credit is fully rolled out. They will miss out on something that is crucial for their physical and mental development.

The Government have said that 50,000 more children will benefit by the end of the roll-out in 2022, when the transitional protections are at capacity, but I and many others struggle to understand how that can be the case. Parliamentary questions tabled by my hon. Friends and others have gone unanswered, and the Government cannot just pluck figures out of the air, as they claim so many others have done. At least we can back up our claims with evidence from the Children's Society, Gingerbread, the Child Poverty Action Group and Citizens Advice, all of which agree that this statutory instrument would take free school meals away from a million future children—*[Interruption.]* It would. If the SI does not come into force, a million more children will receive free school meals—*[Interruption.]* Conservative Members can shake their heads all they like.

During my recent Westminster Hall debate, I offered Ministers a solution that would mean that all children in universal credit households would continue to receive free school meals. As somebody asked earlier, I can say that it would cost half a billion pounds—not a huge cost to feed over a million of the poorest children. My proposal would see around 1.1 million more children in years 3 and above from low-income families receiving free school meals compared with under this change.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): If we were to maintain free school meals for absolutely everybody on universal credit, does the hon. Lady think it would be right to prioritise those coming from the legacy tax credit system, who could be earning up to £50,000 a year, instead of opening up eligibility and getting free school meals to more children in poverty?

Mrs Hodgson: I am running out of time, so—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps Conservative Members would let me finish before they use up all my time. I was going to say that while I cannot go into the full details, because of the time, I understand from the Children's Society that a small number of people are getting up to £40,000. Those people are in large families with severely disabled children. The large amount of money is down to how much they receive for those children. It is disingenuous to use that as an example and to make out that all those families are receiving that amount.

The Minister claimed yesterday that my proposal would result in around half of all pupils becoming eligible, increasing the figure to 3.3 million children. Even the much-cited Channel 4 FactCheck article states that our proposal would extend to 1.1 million children, making the total 1.8 million children. When we talk about facts, Conservative Members need to get their facts right. Where do the extra 1.5 million children come from?

4.28 pm

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Opposition Members know that I have been the first to stand up and challenge the Government on universal credit, and the Government have listened. First, at the 2016 autumn statement, we reduced the taper rate from 65% to 63%, which cost the country £700 million but put around £300 into families' pockets. Secondly, I worked with the Government at the end of last year to secure £1.5 billion of comprehensive improvements: two weeks' extra housing benefit for those transitioning on to universal credit with housing payments; double the advance payment and twice as long to pay it back; direct payments to landlords; and a slowed-down roll-out. Those were all things that the Opposition asked for, so I am staggered that they are asking us to vote against them today.

For the past two years, I have worked not only with my colleagues, but proudly on a cross-party basis to achieve those improvements. Today is a big wake-up call. These motions are not about improving universal credit, but simply about playing politics. I have seen that for the first time. The Government have taken the time to understand how best to transfer a lump-sum benefit such as free school meals into a tapered system such as universal credit. An earnings threshold is perfectly acceptable to all reasonable people—by the way, we are talking about taxpayers. The only possible improvement I could encourage Ministers to look at is automatic entitlement if there is a disability in the family.

Let us get the facts straight. All reception, year 1 and year 2 children will continue to receive free school meals—full stop. The measures apply only to year 3 and beyond. All those currently receiving free school meals will continue to receive them until the end of their phase of schooling or 2022, whichever is the further away. Labour is creating false headlines by saying that any child will lose. Under the proposals, the Government will focus better on children who are in, or at risk of, poverty. That is, as we have heard, around 50,000 children by 2022.

Ben Bradley: Conservative Members know that no children will lose their existing entitlement to free school meals or free childcare as a result of our policies. Meanwhile, my jobcentre says that fear of universal credit is the biggest challenge that it faces in the roll-out. Will my hon. Friend comment on where that fear might be coming from?

Heidi Allen: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point. That fear is particularly prevalent on social media. There is a saying that a mistruth can travel halfway around the world before the truth has even put its boots on. That is happening with universal credit, aided and abetted by social media. Universal credit is not even in my constituency yet, but I hear from constituents who are worried about it. Oddly enough, I can put their minds completely at rest when I explain it to them.

As I have mentioned, tax credits recipients automatically get free school meals at the moment, which could mean that a family on £50,000 a year receives them. That cannot be right—[*Interruption.*] People on legacy tax credits who do not have disabilities in their family—those on the old benefit system who are transferring over—can have regular incomes of up to that level. The new system expands the criteria so that we can get to more children who need our support, not fewer.

Although I understand that a key part of any charity's role is lobbying, I am disappointed in the Children's Society. Its suggestion that 1 million children will lose free school meals is simply not true. Labour has jumped on that bandwagon, and it has taught me a lesson. There are colleagues from all parts of this House—SNP Members included—whom I trust and respect, and with whom I will continue to work to improve the lives of the most vulnerable in society, but if people think that the Labour party is the answer to tackling poverty, they are being misled. Today—this is a big wake-up call to me—the Labour party has clearly shown that it is prioritising headlines over improving the lives of struggling families. If you want a headline spun, Mr Deputy Speaker, ask the Labour party; if you want a competent job done, ask the Tory party.

4.32 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I want to focus on a single point. The proposals for eligibility for free school meals are catastrophic for work incentives in the welfare system. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith)—I am sad to see that he is not in his place—used to tell us that the central point of welfare reform was to improve work incentives, but these proposals rob universal credit of its most attractive feature.

The Secretary of State for Education used to be in charge of universal credit, but this is not so much a criticism of him as a criticism of his predecessors. Ministers in the Department for Education have had seven years to solve the problem—admittedly, it is difficult and technical—of how to define eligibility for free school meals against the backdrop of universal credit. Instead of solving the problem, they have simply adopted a very lazy solution. In doing so, they are creating a very big problem for work incentives in the welfare system. One day, future Ministers will have to resolve that problem. It is disappointing that under the leadership of the Secretary of State, who understands universal credit as well as anybody, they have gone down this very lazy line.

My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) has just quoted from the universal credit White Paper, which sets out the philosophy that underpins the new benefit. I will quote another bit from chapter 2, which makes clear the principle that

“increased effort will always result in increased reward.”

That is what UC is supposed to be about, but under these proposals that will not be the case. As we have heard, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions told us that, when someone is just below the threshold, the jobcentre will advise them not to put in any more effort, not to get a pay rise and not to put in more hours. The jobcentre will recognise that, if they were to do that, they would end up worse off.

Mrs Hodgson: Does my right hon. Friend agree that this just reintroduces in a different guise the much maligned 16-hour threshold, which the Government said this was all to do away with?

Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. The whole idea about UC was that it was supposed to get rid of cliff edges and benefit traps, but

instead it is introducing a benefit trap far bigger and far worse than anything in the old benefit system. This is completely scuppering the whole purpose of UC. If it is true, as the Secretary of State told us, that jobcentre coaches are going to say to people, “No, don’t take on extra work. Don’t get a pay rise. Don’t go for more hours because if you do, you will end up worse off,” how are people supposed to progress? Surely all of us would recognise that the point about this system is to encourage progression, not to have bureaucrats telling people, “Oh no, don’t progress because if you do, you’ll end up worse off.” This is a catastrophic holing of the whole purpose of UC, and it is not as though only a few people will be affected.

The prospectus was that UC would solve all these cliff edges and benefit traps, but instead it is creating one that is much bigger. It has been calculated—I am indebted to the Children’s Society for this calculation—that more than 1 million people will be caught in the trap if these proposals go ahead. I will explain to the Education Secretary exactly why that is; he can read this in briefing the Children’s Society has provided. Some 280,000 families are affected, containing between them more than 700,000 children. Among those are 125,000 families earning below the threshold who risk being worse off if they take on extra work or get a pay rise, as the Work and Pensions Secretary recognised. In addition, there are 150,000 families earning above the threshold who would be better off if they reduced their earnings to below the threshold, so that they would then qualify for free school meals. What sort of system is that? Everybody will recognise that we do not want a welfare system that puts people in that position, but that is the system we will end up with if this statutory instrument goes through. The Children’s Society calculates that almost 21,000 families—containing more than 80,000 children aged eight to 15—who earn more than £7,400 would be better off if they cut their earnings to below the threshold to qualify for school meals. This is a catastrophic arrangement.

4.37 pm

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate, particularly after my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), whose speech was really powerful. It showed how badly Opposition Front Benchers have misjudged this debate. For weeks, outside this House, they have sought to pretend that we are taking free school meals off 1 million children, but that has come to this House and has bombed, because it is not true. The reality is that not a single child currently eligible for free school meals will lose them and that, under UC, 50,000 more children will be eligible for free school meals. This shows the limits of an approach that is all about the viral video and getting something that goes around on social media quickly; it goes too quickly for the fact-checkers to catch up with, but when it comes to this House and we learn the facts, it absolutely bombs.

If people are serious about being in government, they have to make choices, and this Government have made choices. The Opposition say they would like simply to give free school meals out universally, as part of a wider strategy in which we can just spend more money on everything and no one will have to pay any more tax—of course, it is all nonsense. It is the kind of dangerous nonsense that led to the Government borrowing a quarter of all the money they were spending in 2010,

a disastrous situation in which we also had half a million men and women thrown on the dole in the worst economic meltdown for a generation.

If we choose priorities that enable us to do important things for working families with children, that allows us to extend eligibility for the new tax-free childcare from 600,000 people to 1.5 million people, to have important things such as the 30 hours’ free childcare offer, to have the important two-year-old childcare offer, which under UC is being expanded by another 7,000, and to have the more generous childcare element of UC, which is going up from 75% to 85%.

Prioritisation also helps with important interventions such as the pupil premium, with another £2.5 billion for the most disadvantaged children, and the new fair funding formula for schools, which is backed up by another £1.3 billion. The year 7s I met the other day at Beauchamp College in my constituency, of whom 60% will be eligible for the pupil premium, will get to go to Cambridge, do a science project and see their lives and opportunities absolutely transformed, because we are prepared to take the difficult decisions, to invest in those children’s futures and to give them a better chance in life.

It is incredibly important that we do not simply drift back to the mistakes of the past. Compared with what it was like when I was at school, the help for children who are less advantaged is so much better now. We have done brilliant things such as destigmatising free school meals: pupils no longer go in with their money, so it cannot be seen who is on free school meals and who is not. When I think back to what it was like when I was at school, I can see the big improvement we have made since my generation.

We have seen big improvements for working families with children because even as we have brought down the worst Government Budget deficit in this country’s entire peacetime history, we have prioritised, and we have done so in ways that help the most vulnerable and that help to improve life chances for those who do not have them.

4.41 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, in which I wish to focus my remarks on childcare and free school meals.

I put on record that the Liberal Democrats are proud of the role that we played in the coalition Government to secure a generous tax-free offer on childcare that helps many families. Although it is true that it will extend to more families, it is also true that many others will be left out. That was never the intention. Many parents—particularly those with older children, lower childcare costs or lower incomes—will find themselves worse off under tax-free childcare than they would have been with childcare vouchers. It is unfair to close the scheme to new entrants, particularly because, unsurprisingly, the information about the closure of the scheme has not been spread as far and wide as it could have been. I urge all those parents who are listening to the debate—I am sure that there are many—to do their research before April, so that they can decide what is best for their families. All we are suggesting is that tax-free childcare and childcare vouchers are kept open concurrently, so that we can provide maximum flexibility for families. Surely, the Government would agree that that would be a good thing.

[Layla Moran]

I hope that the whole House will join me in paying tribute to the former Liberal Democrat Ministers David Laws and Sarah Teather for battling to secure universal free school meals for all children in key stage 1. Soon after I was elected, I visited West Oxford Community Primary School and had the pleasure of meeting the catering manager. She told me that, despite being sceptical of the policy initially, she now thinks it is brilliant. She took great pride in telling me of a boy from a deprived background who did not eat much veg at home because it is quite expensive. Slowly—slowly—she got him to love broccoli.

I am a primary school governor, and the teachers at the school are absolutely clear—this is backed up by the evidence—that universal free school meals are beneficial for learning and attainment and help all children. The Government like to nick Liberal Democrat policies—including same-sex marriage, the pupil premium and lifting the income tax threshold, as we heard in the spring statement earlier—and I am not precious, so they can have another one: extend free school meals to all children in primary schools. If not that, they could at least extend them to all children on universal credit.

Unlike under tax credits, universal credit creates an absurd situation wherein a single-parent household on the national living wage will have to work eight more hours to make it work. Surely, that is not what the Government intended. Linked to that, of course, is the fact that the number of children on free school meals will affect the pupil premium. I posit that that is the reason why the Government will not roll out free school meals to all children on universal credit—because, yes, it would be prohibitively expensive and would stop the targeting of the pupil premium.

May I suggest to the Secretary of State that, to sort that out, just decouple them? They are, in their own right, worthy policies. They are policies that are working and there is no reason to throw the baby out with the bathwater. May I urge the Government to think again on free school meals and to think again on closing the childcare voucher scheme?

4.45 pm

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): It is good to follow the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). She talked about the years when our two parties were in coalition, and we all recognise and welcome the fact that we have those universal free school meals for infant children; it was a positive step forward.

I was not intending to speak in this debate this afternoon—and I am someone who is always happy to debate with anyone—but I was moved to speak not just because I have received quite a bit of correspondence from concerned constituents on this matter, but because I genuinely believe that it is incumbent on all Members of this House to argue and to make their points. In doing so, though, we must make sure that what we say is grounded in fact, and that we do not play fast and loose with the arguments, because what we say here has very real consequences for people in our constituencies.

Some very worried parents have been in contact with me today. This situation is rather like the time when the shadow Front Bench claimed that 40,000 children would wake up in poverty on Christmas day because the Tories

refused to pause and fix universal credit, and the chairman of the UK Statistics Authority said that that was not fully supported by the statistics and the sources on which it had relied. I am afraid that it appears to me that the Opposition are at it again. Therefore, I want to use my remarks this afternoon to speak directly to those concerned parents in Corby and east Northamptonshire who have been in touch with me about this issue.

First, we would all agree that free school meals, and the provision of those free school meals, should be targeted at the most disadvantaged children; I would like to think that there was universal agreement on that point. To say that meals are being taken away from those disadvantaged children is simply plain wrong. It is not just me who is saying it—[*Interruption.*] Opposition Members can chunter all they like, but that is the case. The independent “Channel 4 News” FactCheck website exposed all of this for exactly what it is and I recommend that everybody takes a look at it. “Channel 4 News” would not necessarily be considered to be a friend of the Conservative party, but it made this point none the less. No child will lose their free school meals during the roll-out of universal credit as a result of these changes. In actual fact, an extra 50,000 children will probably have access to free school meals by 2022. I would welcome that, and I would expect the Opposition to welcome that, too. I cannot possibly see what there is to argue against in that position. Again, I make the point that, since 2010, we have extended the availability of access to free school meals to disadvantaged students in further education and introduced universal infant free school meals.

We should not look at this issue in isolation; other things are going on as well that are very important to those families. Not only do we have record numbers of people in employment, but we have also taken 4 million of the lowest paid out of income tax altogether. We have cut income tax for 31 million people in this country, and we have focused on the principle that being in work should always pay. Any fair-minded person in this country would agree that that is the right approach, but that, of course, there should always be a safety net for those who find themselves in need. That is exactly what this policy, in a holistic sense, allows.

I am proud of our record. I have to say that I am slightly perplexed by where we find ourselves today, because rather like on police funding, on local government funding, and on protecting our industries from dumping on our market, the Labour party tonight will vote against extending free school meals for another 50,000 children, and I find that extraordinary.

4.49 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove). The Government know that stopping free school meals for the poorest children is a shameful policy. They sought to bring the measures in using statutory instruments, in the hope that any challenge would be ineffective. It is clear that the Government do not want to explain this indefensible change.

Some 3,700 children in Bedford are set to miss out on vital support if free school meals are withdrawn from families on universal credit. The Government need to understand that the poverty trap is very easy to get into, but very difficult to get out of. Every penny counts for

those families, and for many working families there simply are not enough pennies to get through the month. Last summer, 47% of children who received support from food banks were between five and 11 years old.

Heidi Allen: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mohammad Yasin: I am sorry, but I cannot. Many other Members want to speak and it is fair to give them a chance.

During the summer holidays 4,412 more three-day emergency food supplies were given to children than in previous months, and we know that children on free school meals already underperform in schools. Why would any Government choose to make life more difficult and more challenging for those children?

Mark Menzies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mohammad Yasin: A number of Members want to speak. It would be unfair if I gave way, as the hon. Gentleman has spoken already.

Why would a Government who claim to want to tackle inequality, to help the disadvantaged, to tackle child obesity and to help out those who are just about managing come up with a policy that does the exact opposite? The new earnings limit is a huge step backwards. According to the Children's Society, 1 million children in poverty who could benefit now will not. This policy also undermines one of the main reasons given for introducing universal credit in the first place—to ensure that “work always pays”. The new rules will create a situation where working families will be punished for taking on extra hours or accepting a pay rise because they would have their free school meals taken away. These are worth around £400 a year per child—a huge sum for those on a low income.

A recent report from the Food Foundation highlights the deprivation gap, which has increased by more than 50% in a decade. Children in the poorest areas of England are twice as likely to be obese as their wealthier neighbours. The Government could have tackled that problem by increasing the uptake of free school meals and ensuring that all children from low-income households receive a nutritious meal at lunchtime. Instead they are taking those meals away. The Government should have learned from their attempts to take away free school meals in the manifesto that they put to the country last year that they have no mandate to reduce school meals and it makes no sense to do so. Schools cannot teach hungry children. If the Government were serious about life chances and social mobility, they would not be taking food out of the mouths of babes.

4.53 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): We live in strange political times both in this country and across the Atlantic, where we frequently hear reports about fake news. In such times it is therefore particularly incumbent on Members of all parties in this House to be very careful about the way in which they use and present facts, because democratic discourse is impossible without honest and accurate facts. We undermine our entire system of democracy when elected Members of this Parliament play fast and loose with facts.

We have heard Members in this debate saying that free school meals are going to be reduced—that was the phrase used by the previous speaker. Other Opposition

Members have said that free school meals would be “taken away”. It is clear that those statements are not accurate. Several colleagues have referred to the “Channel 4 News” FactCheck discourse on this matter, and it is clear that no children currently in receipt of free school meals will have them taken away. In fact, more children will receive free school meals as a result of these proposals. It is simply untrue to say that 1 million children will have their free school meals taken away or reduced. By making comments implying that, the shadow Education Secretary, who I can see chuntering, is doing our democracy a disservice.

Perhaps the hon. Lady is trying to insinuate that there was a Government policy that would have provided extra school meals, but for some kind of U-turn. The “Channel 4 News” FactCheck is clear about that as well, and the Government have also been clear about it. There was an interim transitional measure. My right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), when he was a junior Skills Minister, made that clear when the scheme was set up in April 2013, and my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill), when he was a junior Education Minister, made the same point last July. It is wholly inaccurate to suggest that there was ever a hypothetical Government policy under which these children would ever have received extra school meals.

The shadow Education Secretary has done this House and herself a great disservice—[*Interruption.*] Indeed she has the right to speak, but she ought to take care to be accurate when she does so, because her words matter and she should weigh them carefully.

Angela Rayner: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is there any recourse for me to challenge the fact that an hon. Member is suggesting that I have misled this House in this debate?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): First of all, nobody will mislead this House because we are all hon. Members. I am sure that when we come to the wind-ups, everything will be put in its correct order.

Chris Philp: The hon. Lady and her party have suggested that everybody in receipt of universal credit should receive free school meals. That has never been the policy of the Government, but apparently it is the policy of the Labour party. That would entail about 50% of schoolchildren receiving free school meals. She was asked, in a direct question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), how much this policy, which goes beyond that in the Labour manifesto, would cost and how she would pay for it, but she declined to answer. If she is advocating this policy which goes far beyond current Government policy—as she clearly is—she ought to explain how much it would cost and how she would pay for it, because promising things for free without explaining how they would be paid for is a deeply irresponsible thing to do. I will support the Government in this evening's Divisions.

4.57 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): It is time to be frank. Universal credit is currently a failure. It is not working how it was meant to. It is not supporting the people who need it. Its roll-out happened too fast,

[*Thelma Walker*]

which meant that there has not been time to fix the many issues that have been brought to the House's attention.

Twenty-four per cent. of children in my constituency live in poverty. In some areas, that figure increases to 40%. For some of the children whose parents are on universal credit, the hot, nutritionally balanced meal they have for lunch at school will be their main meal of the day. In no way is that a good situation to face, but at least those children are being fed. Well, not if Government Front Benchers have anything to do with it. Removing free school meals from those families who are claiming universal credit and who need them the most is deplorable. What kind of society do we want to live in? What Government in their right mind would take a hot meal off a child in need?

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con) *rose*—

Thelma Walker: I am going to make progress.

Let me take hon. Members back to the 2016 Conservative party conference, where the Prime Minister said:

"I want to set our party and our country on the path towards the new centre ground of British politics built on the values of fairness and opportunity where everyone plays by the same rules and where every single person—regardless of their background, or that of their parents—is given the chance to be all they want to be. And as I do so, I want to be clear about something else: that a vision is nothing without the determination to see it through. No vision ever built a business by itself. No vision ever clothed a family or fed a hungry child. No vision ever changed a country on its own. You need to put the hours in and the effort too."

Why are the Government not following the Prime Minister's vision? Is it another sign of how she is in position but not in power? If she still believes in her own words, she must stand up and stop this attack on the poorest in our society.

My local authority, Kirklees Council, has seen a 20% increase in pupils claiming free school meals over the last four years, which goes to show how hard the Government's austerity programme is hitting families. There has been a huge spike in food bank use, which also shows that we are a country on the cliff edge. Food banks do an amazing job of supporting those in need, and I commend the work of local food banks such as the Welcome Centre, which serves my constituency.

What kind of country do we want to live in? Do we want to live in a country where a child clings to a teacher's hand as the school holidays approach, not wanting to leave school because they know they will be hungry for the next six weeks? Do we want to live in a country that chooses to let disadvantaged children go hungry? Do we want to live in a country where a child comes to school with a lunchbox filled only with a slice of stale bread? I have witnessed those things, and I can say that it is certainly not the kind of country I want to live in. Some 6,400 children in Kirklees will lose their free school meals because of the Government's actions. I will bring my remarks to a close with a thought from Buzz Aldrin: if we can conquer space, we can conquer childhood hunger.

5.1 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Colne Valley (*Thelma Walker*), but I have not heard any real vision at all from

Labour Members. It is disgraceful that their only vision for working-class people in this country is to remain on benefits. Universal credit is getting people into work. Some 63% of people on universal credit get into work, compared with 59% who were on jobseeker's allowance.

No one can tell me that I do not know what it is like to grow up in a working-class family. I grew up in a working-class area of south London, where there was no hope or aspiration for working-class kids like me. We were told that all we would achieve was a lifetime on benefits. Our working-class communities up and down this country can achieve a lot more, and universal credit will help them to do so.

The second reason I am particularly angry with Labour Members is that they are spreading fear. I think they underestimate the fear they are causing in this country. When I was growing up, my family were poor. My dad worked as a labourer, and he did not often know when his next job was coming. If his job finished early, he did not get paid. If the subcontractor did not get paid, he did not get paid. There is a sickening, gnawing feeling in your stomach when you are not sure where the next penny is coming from. To tell 1 million families in this country that they will lose free school meals when that is absolutely wrong is scandalous, and Labour Members should be ashamed.

Let me reiterate the facts. All children in reception, year 1 and year 2 will continue to get free school meals, thanks to this Government. No existing recipients of universal credit will lose free school meals, thanks to this Government. Some 50,000 extra children will get free school meals who currently do not, and that is down to this Government. The means testing will not affect those who are earning just over £7,000, but those who are earning around £19,000 to £24,000. I do not think that Labour Members understand the impact they have when they spread this fear—and it is not a genuine mistake; it is political point scoring and using working-class families in this country as a political football. They should be ashamed of themselves.

I will be supporting the Government. I will be supporting 50,000 vulnerable families getting free school meals. If Labour Members vote against those working-class families, they need to look at themselves in the mirror, because it is the same thing they did a few months ago when they voted against 60,000 young people in this country benefiting from the abolition of stamp duty for first-time buyers. Labour Members talk about supporting working-class families in this country, but it is the Conservative Government who are actually delivering for them.

5.4 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I will limit my remarks to the universal credit portion of this debate. In accepting the failures so far, the Government have made some changes, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (*Neil Gray*) pointed out, the changes due to come into force in April do not go far enough. Ministers should pause the roll-out of universal credit and review all the processes.

I want to go through a couple of the issues, but I could speak for a lot longer on many of the issues affecting my constituents. My constituency was a pilot area from 2013, and went from live service to full service in June 2016. Local agencies, Highland Council

and I have been voicing such concerns since the pilot, and the proposed measures do not scratch the surface of what is required. The Secretary of State said earlier that this benefit will be “at the cutting edge”. I say to those yet to experience full service that, yes, they will see more cutting, particularly when it comes to the housing arrears that are being built up.

Like other local authorities, Highland Council is paying the price, and this will have an impact on all our communities, not just on people who are on universal credit. The additional administration costs alone are running at hundreds of thousands of pounds, but rent arrears continue to soar and will have an impact on the delivery of much needed housing, for example.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a very serious point about housing benefit. Does he welcome the change that allows the benefit to be paid directly to the landlord, as opposed to going to the claimant?

Drew Hendry: I welcome any change that allows such things to happen. I would point out that we made that request of the Government for many years, and the concession was finally made, as I have pointed out, but much more needs to be done.

Rent arrears continue to soar, as I have said. Rent arrears due to universal credit were already at £1.6 million in Highland in 2016, but they were at £2.2 million in March 2017, and just six months later they were at £2.7 million. The average rent arrears for someone not on universal credit is £250, but for those on universal credit it is £840. We know that 30% of private landlords have already evicted a tenant because of universal credit arrears. According to the DWP's own figures, this means that over 70,000 tenants in private accommodation face the threat of eviction due to the shambles of universal credit.

The UK Government continue to ignore the plight of people with a terminal illness who are forced to meet work coaches. I give credit to my local jobcentre, which has tried to put in place local workarounds to overcome the faults in the process. The UK Government must listen to MND Scotland, MND UK and Macmillan CAB, and remove these conditions to allow the terminally ill and their families some dignity as they face the end of their life. I ask Ministers to meet me to discuss how that can be brought forward. MND UK has said it does not believe that people who have claimed using DS 1500 should have to meet and have a conversation with a work coach, as this is highly inappropriate. The Government have already been found to have acted unlawfully in relation to 1.6 million people, at an estimated cost to the taxpayer of £3.7 billion, and they should not risk the same kind of slap-down over their treatment of the terminally ill.

As the roll-out continues, many more right hon. and hon. Members will feel the sharp effects on people and their communities. Ministers should go further in acknowledging the systemic failures before it adds more costs to people's lives and drains local government of vital resources.

5.8 pm

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I am pleased to be called to speak in this important debate, and it is a pleasure to follow so many powerful speeches by Conservative Members.

Yet again, we heard it said from the Labour Front Bench that children in poverty will lose out in relation to free school meals. First, that is factually inaccurate; and, secondly, figures on poverty are often bandied around in this place, but it is time we had a grown-up conversation about both poverty in general and child poverty in particular. So often, the Labour party uses relative poverty as a measure. When there is a recession, a fall in average earnings will of course mean that suddenly—hey presto!—children are lifted out of poverty: the poverty statistics improve. For example, in 2008, following Labour's recession, there was a sharp reduction in the proportion of children in workless families living in relative poverty. Living standards had not improved and incomes had not increased, but, as a result of the measure that Labour used, suddenly children were lifted out of poverty. Conversely, when real wages rise, poverty rates increase, despite the fact that people's incomes have not fallen.

It is time we had a grown-up conversation about this, because relying on that measure fails to tackle the root causes of poverty and could result in Governments pursuing skewed policies. Work remains the best route out of poverty, which is why I firmly support universal credit and these measures. These measures are part of a £1.5 billion package brought in by this Government. Frankly, I am surprised that Opposition Members will not support them this evening.

That brings me to free school meals. Children currently in receipt of free school meals will not lose out. In fact, 50,000 more children will benefit from free school meals than under the legacy benefits system. Free schools meals should be targeted at the most vulnerable. It is not a fair allocation of resources that a family with a total income in excess of £40,000 is entitled to free school meals. Neither would it be right and proper to aim free school meals at 50% of children, yet that is what would happen if these measures are not allowed to proceed this evening. Free school meals should be targeted at the most disadvantaged. These measures will ensure that help is targeted at those who need it most, and that should attract support from both sides of the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I have to reduce the time limit to three minutes, because so many Members wish to speak.

5.12 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I have been texting my team furiously during the debate to check, double check and triple check that what I am about to say is accurate. I asked them to ring the DWP and the Library and then assure me that this is right. The vast majority of my constituents who currently receive tax credits are not on universal credit and will not be migrated on to it for some time, and they will not be protected by transitional arrangements, which will not apply. I have just checked this with the DWP and the Library. This is about the future denial of free schools meals, and it is valid that we have a conversation about that. I am not interested in embellishment in this debate, because the truth is enough.

For people who are in work and in poverty, or looking for work and in poverty, food is a huge part of their expenditure. It is a never-ending struggle to make sure

[Laura Pidcock]

that there is enough to eat, and that children are getting enough to keep them healthy and well. Children cannot concentrate in school when they are hungry—we all know the arguments. For many young people, that one hot meal is all they will get. I have not been told, despite the claim being repeated time and again, what calculation was used to reach the figure of 50,000 for the number of extra children who will get free school meals. I am sorry, but I am just not able to believe that on a whim, or on a calculation that was plucked out of thin air.

Under the current system, families are normally entitled to free school meals if their income is under £16,190. That will be changed to £7,400 per year, unless it is covered by transitional protections. The reduction to £7,400 is, frankly, delusional. Who will it help? What is the figure based on? Which advisers, experts or charitable organisations have the Government met who actually think that slashing the threshold is a good idea for children in low-income households? The BBC rang around headteachers to try to get a quote on these changes, but not one headteacher knew about them, so what consultation has there been with schools?

Anna Soubry: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Laura Pidcock: Time is very short, so I am certainly not going to give way to somebody who has intervened many times and was not here for the start of the debate.

Nearly 2,000 children in my constituency quite rightly—

Anna Soubry: Just for the record, Madam Deputy Speaker, I was in this place when the debate started.

Laura Pidcock: Well, that was not my experience. Anyway, the idea that claimants in my area—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I cannot hear the hon. Lady. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Lady should not shout from a sedentary position when I am defending her and giving her space.

Laura Pidcock: I have 17 seconds left and there have been so many interruptions.

Mrs Hodgson: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. As a fellow north-easterner, I want her to be able to finish her point.

Laura Pidcock: There are 2,000 children in my constituency who rightly receive subsidised school meals. The reason that new claimants after 1 April will not be protected is not that they no longer need that protection or need those meals; it is due to arbitrary cuts. This change will ensure that more children are in poverty and that more people have to access food banks. The Government may be able to justify that in this Chamber, but how can they justify it to a child? Taking all the proposed changes together with all the changes that have already happened to the so-called social security system, the only conclusion I can draw is that there is no security anymore. That is not embellishment: I know poverty when I see it staring me in the face in my constituency surgeries. We do not need to lie, we do not need to embellish. The truth is good enough: these changes are shambolic.

5.16 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): As a fellow north-easterner who also has a great deal of poverty in his constituency, perhaps I might be allowed to speak in this debate.

I will be blunt. I am tired of the Opposition playing games with this issue, not just today but over the preceding weeks and months. Let us be very clear: by 2022, 50,000 more children will have free school meals than is the case today. Nobody—not one child in any school, anywhere in our country—is going to lose the free school meal they currently receive. I must admit that I am somewhat surprised, even by the standards of the Labour party, by today's claims. It was only a month ago, in response to a letter from me, that the chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir David Norgrove, wrote to rebuke the now former shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), about her use of statistics in this field. All the claims were found by the UK Statistics Authority not to be supported by statistics, or by the sources on which they purported to rely.

We can add today the frenzied assertion that universal credit will leave 1 million children without a free hot school meal. That is wrong, not just because of its flimsy attachment to reality, but because it creates needless anxiety in the communities we serve. We need to be very clear about why universal credit is being introduced in the first place. The hostile approach with which Labour has chosen to approach the issue is regrettable and damaging. It is not about what is right for the jobless or for the working poor in our society; it is about what is in the electoral interests of the Labour party.

The reality is that the professionals I have spoken to at the DWP have told me repeatedly that this system is working and that they believe it is doing the right thing by the people whom they serve. Women like **Sindy Skelton**—[*Interruption.*] Perhaps the hon. Member for Bootle (**Peter Dowd**) wants to accuse Sindy of being a liar or of misleading me in some way, but I think that jobcentre staff up and down our country have every right to be angry at the way in which they are permanently castigated by Opposition Members as somehow the embodiment of a cruel and faceless state. Ministers have demonstrated time after time that they will take whatever action is necessary to make sure that universal credit delivers the outcomes we all want. If Labour is serious about helping people into work, and serious about supporting the most vulnerable in our society, it should give up the cheap posturing we have seen today. Many Labour Members know in their heart of hearts that they have over-embellished and laid things on a bit too thick. In the end, there is a serious debate to be had about poverty reduction.

Heidi Allen: Does my hon. Friend think that the number of Members on the Opposition Benches, and the lack of retaliation, means that they have realised that they have pushed it too far, and that they are now woefully out of their depth and just plain wrong?

Mr Clarke: My hon. Friend made a very powerful speech on this theme earlier. I think what she says is true. In fact, there is a pretty sparse attendance on the Opposition Benches, given that this was meant to be an

open goal. This was absolutely all about clips for the TV news, Facebook pages and Twitter—“The heartless Tories ripping food out of the hands of kids.” Well, that is not happening. None of us came into politics to make anyone’s lives worse. I am sick and tired of being told that we are somehow the bad guys because we believe in running a balanced economy and focusing on helping those in need, rather than trying to use them as political footballs to achieve political goals.

5.20 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): As the chair of the all-party group on universal credit, I want to lay out the facts of the measures for Members from across the House. I am very sorry that they have not been before Select Committees to allow them to look properly at the case. Unfortunately, the facts in the Government’s case are wrong. They claim that this is about parents of school-age children who are on about £7,400 a year and say that, with other benefits, those people will be on between £18,000 and £24,000 a year. However, according to the benefits calculator on the gov.uk website, we are thinking about a single parent with one school-age child who is on £14,200. She will be on the poverty line but will not be eligible for free school meals. Under tax credits, that single parent would have been £1,600 a year better off. She will lose that money and her child will not be able to claim free school meals. She will be £25 a week worse off and will still have to pay around £11.25 a week towards school meals. She does not get a free school meal at the moment, but she can afford that, because she is on tax credits, which is a far more generous system.

This is the trouble with universal credit: it cuts an average of £1,300 a year from working single parents. At the moment, one in three of the children of these single parents is in poverty. Gingerbread, the Child Poverty Action Group, the Children’s Society, the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Resolution Foundation all say that universal credit will increase the number of children in poverty over the next four years by 1 million. Not only will those children be in poverty, but now, thanks to a statutory instrument, they will not be able to claim free school meals. They will not get that hot, nutritious meal at lunchtime that will help them to concentrate throughout the day and to realise the levels of nutrition that they need. This also affects their eligibility for school trips through the pupil premium.

My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), the chair of the all-party group on school food, gave Education Ministers the proposal of delinking the pupil premium to enable pupils to still be able to receive free school meals. Children might not be in poverty now and might not be receiving a free school meal, but they will be in poverty in four years’ time, thanks to the cuts introduced under universal credit. They will not be eligible for a free school meal either, and they should be. Not to make that change, not to look properly at it and to go on figures about benefits that are wrong—to try to mislead the House with figures in a consultation document that are blatantly wrong about the people’s income—does a disservice to the 1 million children and the 280,000 families who will be on the cliff edge and seeing a disincentive to work. Across this House, we all want to see an incentive to work. Any parent with children who is earning between £7,400 and around £11,000 a year will not be better off in work.

Mrs Hodgson: My hon. Friend mentioned decoupling the pupil premium. Under the Digital Economy Act 2017, that is now possible. Schools already know how to claim pupil premium for the universal infant free school meals offer. Does she agree that we are totally able to decouple the two?

Ruth George: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. In a Westminster Hall debate a few weeks ago, Conservative Members said it was because of the cost of the pupil premium that they did not want free school meals extended, and that we could therefore set the pupil premium at the level proposed by the Government. We must, however, make sure that every child in poverty is entitled to the free school meals they need so that they have a better chance in school and better life chances, and to ensure that we try to eradicate child hunger instead of increasing it.

5.24 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): We are here to improve lives and to raise the sum of human happiness. We know that the best way out of poverty is work and that purposeful work is the key to human happiness, and we all want to give kids the best possible start in life, which includes meals for the poorest and high-quality pre-school childcare, which we know improves outcomes for the most disadvantaged children in our country.

We know, too, that universal credit is helping to improve lives. It has been on offer in my constituency for some time and has now been fully rolled out. The feedback I get from the jobcentres that serve my constituency—job coaches tell me this with great passion—is that it is helping them to help people, and helping people to get into work, increase their hours and find better work. It is overwhelmingly a good thing. I spoke to my local citizens advice bureau to find out what problems it was experiencing, following rumours that universal credit was causing trouble, and on the day I went in, there had been two calls about universal credit. I asked what they were. One was, “How can I get it?”, and the other was, “Am I eligible?” So people were calling the CAB because they wanted to be on universal credit, because they had heard good things about it. I am therefore really concerned that we are hearing such misleading information in the Chamber, when we know that universal credit is helping people to get into work, stay in work and find better work.

The Government have listened to and addressed concerns about universal credit, for instance by giving people better access to advance payments and not making them wait for payments. The Government are doing exactly the right thing to make universal credit work even better, and Labour Members should be supporting that, not trying to block it. I am worried that they are stuck in the 1970s. Perhaps then it was okay to give up on people and condemn them to a life on benefits, but we know now that that is not the right thing to do. They should be supporting us to help their constituents to get into work and stay in work.

On free school meals, we have seen a shocking abuse of figures. We know that as a result of the Government’s policies, 50,000 more children will get free school meals and no child will lose their right to them, so let us not have any scaremongering about children losing free school meals. Let us also have a bit more clarity about

[Helen Whately]

how Labour might pay for their proposals which, according to latest estimates, would cost the country an extra £100 billion and increase borrowing per family by £4,000. I say to Labour Members, “Let us do the right thing.” Let us not play party politics, but help to make people’s lives better.

5.27 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am mindful of the time, so I will not take up as much of it as I had planned.

It is disappointing that there are now few ways in which the House can express its opinion, but one of those ways is by our debating and voting on statutory instruments. We see time and again on Opposition days the House making its voice clear. In October, the House voted by 299 votes to zero to call for a halt to the roll-out of universal credit, but that did not happen. Conservative Members talk about parliamentary sovereignty and the will of the House being listened to, but they do not then follow through. I am glad, therefore, that we have an opportunity today, on a binding vote, to make our view clear to the Government.

Today we are debating four statutory instruments. I will focus on the one relating to universal credit, but before I do so, I want to touch on childcare vouchers. I and many other Members are worried about the UK Government’s plans to close the childcare voucher scheme, so we urge them to reconsider. I want to draw a contrast with some of the family-friendly policies that we are pursuing north of the border, such as the baby box scheme, which gives children the very best start in life from birth—that sends a strong signal about equality. We have free school meals for children in primaries 1 to 3 and the doubling of childcare provision. On the latter, I must declare an interest, as my son is starting nursery in August, and is very excited about going to Sgoil Àraich Lyoncross. The Scottish Government have made it clear that children should be able to get such childcare, and it is good that we are delivering on that.

I wish to commend the new city government in Glasgow led by Susan Aitken. In the last council budget, they announced that free school meals would be rolled out to primary 4. As someone who is married to a primary school teacher, I know at first hand the importance of schoolchildren having a warm and nutritious meal inside them. I welcome the efforts of Glasgow City Council to tackle holiday hunger as well.

I will focus briefly on universal credit, because I am mindful of the time. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), who has done a power of work on universal credit since long before it was fashionable to talk about it. He has, I believe, been pursuing the issue since 2013. I think that his work on terminal illness is especially important. There have been some pretty unedifying scenes on both sides of the Chamber today. We should be mindful of the fact that we are talking about real people, and, in particular, about people with terminal illnesses. That message should go to all of us, including me.

I have made it clear to journalists that I have no interest in being on “Newsnight” or “Question Time”, or in clocking up views in Nigeria on YouTube like my

hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black). I see the job of being a Member of Parliament as being out in the constituency listening to people and hearing about lived experiences. I appreciate that at various points during the debate, the Government will say that the Opposition are scaremongering, and they can say that to a certain extent—they would be expected to say it. However, as a constituency Member of Parliament, I speak to constituents regularly, and people at the Parkhead housing association, the West of Scotland housing association and the Glasgow NE food bank say that universal credit must be halted.

5.31 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I have a qualified welcome for this important debate. I will touch briefly on universal credit and free school meals.

On universal credit, I welcome what has been done by the Chancellor and a succession of Secretaries of State. Universal credit is there to get people into work and to ensure that, when they are in work, they can take on more work, make progress in their careers and, ideally, cease to be dependent on welfare payments. That is what we want to happen, and the system has been reformed over the years to become better and better.

I have very little time, but I want to highlight the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen). She captured brilliantly the reforms that have been delivered in recent years and made the point that a debate that should have been about improving universal credit has turned into a headline-grabbing agenda by the Labour party.

I have visited the two jobcentres that serve my constituency, and the enthusiasm of the staff in both of them for universal credit was incredible. I was blown away by their support for it. They can help people now: rather than being faceless, grey, stand-offish organisations, they can engage with people in a way that has not been possible for them before. We should support universal credit enthusiastically—and, yes, where improvements need to be made, let us make them.

On free school meals, we ought to have a vision that the children who are most in need should receive them, but they should not be received by the children of those who are earning a significantly higher amount of money. It is disappointing that Labour Members will vote today to prevent 50,000 children—the poorest children in our country—from receiving free school meals when universal credit is rolled out and will vote to ensure that families with an income of more than £40,000 a year continue to receive them. I think that the Labour party has the wrong values, but it is not just the Labour party: in my constituency, the Liberal Democrats have been putting out propaganda saying that the children of those who earn more than £7,400 a year will no longer receive free school meals. That is not a cut-off; it is only a fraction of the actual income.

Because of the time constraint, I will end my speech by saying that I support the Government and their actions.

5.35 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I would like to feel able to thank every Member who has spoken in the debate, but, frankly, the only meals Tory Members are interested

in are when their rich donors pay them to have them. Those are the only meals they are interested in. *[Interruption.]* That is all they are interested in.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Peter Dowd: We have been asked today to tell the truth: I have just told the truth, and the truth hurts as far as Tory Members are concerned. *[Interruption.]* The four statutory instruments we are debating today—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Peter Dowd: That has upset Tory Members; they are deeply upset about it. The four statutory instruments taken together would end childcare vouchers, restrict the number of children receiving free school meals and limit access to universal credit for the self-employed and disabled people.

Rachel Maclean: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Dowd: No, I will not.

Far from seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, this Government have indicated once more their relentless desire to throw some of the poorest into the shade. While the Chancellor came to the House today to pat himself on the back, with no sense of irony whatsoever, these new regulations remind us that austerity is far from over. Depriving some of the poorest children in the country access to a free school meal on its own would be considered shameful, but paired with the restriction on childcare vouchers and the introduction of tougher criteria for universal credit, we have a cruel cocktail of cuts and misery—and Tory Members know a lot about cocktails as well when they are at their meals.

The Children's Society estimates—*[Interruption.]* Fact check: the Children's Society estimates that the changes the measures the Government are seeking to introduce will see 1 million children in poverty unable to benefit from free school meals because of them pulling the rug on the current transitional arrangements, and to add insult to injury, by setting an income threshold for the children of those on universal credit to qualify for free school meals, the Government are creating a cliff-hanger which will leave around 350,000 families worse off. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. There are clearly heightened tempers, but we must have some decorum to allow us to listen to Mr Dowd.

Peter Dowd: Thank you; “They don’t like it up ’em.”

These families, who will move just above the threshold, will be forced to shoulder the cost of school meals from their household budgets at the cost of hundreds of pounds per child.

Mr Duncan Smith: The hon. Gentleman now has to answer one very simple question. He and his whole Front-Bench team have been putting it about that 1 million children will lose their right to free school meals. Will he now stand at the Dispatch Box and apologise to the House for misleading the public?

Peter Dowd: What I will say is this—*[Interruption.]* If Tory Members want to listen, I am more than happy to say this:

“I am unable to watch passively whilst certain policies are enacted in order to meet the fiscal self-imposed restraints that I believe are more and more perceived as distinctly political rather than in the national economic interest.”

That is from the right hon. Gentleman’s resignation letter.

Why do the Government feel the need to cut the number of children who are eligible for free school meals? Why are the Conservatives keen to limit the number of parents eligible for childcare vouchers? And why do Ministers seem content with ensuring that the self-employed and disabled on universal credit are worse off and at further risk of sanctions?

The Chancellor’s mantra, as with his predecessor, has been fiscal prudence, a concept hijacked by an ideologue for ideological purposes. He has long proclaimed, whether on spending on public services or on the welfare state, that there must be belt-tightening. In the name of balancing the Budget, we have seen almost a fifth of women’s refuge shelters close under this Government’s cuts, while 41% of children’s services are unable to perform their statutory duties. Yet the Chancellor can somehow conjure up money to give large multinational corporations and the wealthiest £70 billion-worth of tax cuts by the end of the Parliament; no belt-tightening there.

If we look at the decision to cut the top rate of income tax from 50p to 45p alone, research—fact—has shown that those earning over £1 million pounds a year have saved on average £554,000 from 2013 to 2018. There was no belt-tightening there, either. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Members must not shout at the hon. Gentleman.

Peter Dowd: Over the past five years, this tax cut has cost the British taxpayer £8.4 billion. That £8.4 billion could instead have fully funded universal credit, extended free school meals or ensured tax-free childcare for all. Fact check: that is a fact.

Childcare remains the biggest cost for working households. For some families, the childcare bill is crippling their finances. The childcare voucher scheme is not only popular but well subscribed, with some 780,000 parents using vouchers and more than 50,000 employers offering childcare voucher schemes. Most employers who provide vouchers currently do so through salary sacrifice schemes, exempting recipients from income tax and national insurance on vouchers up to a maximum of £55 a week. The scheme has its flaws—for example, it does not cover self-employed people and requires employers to be registered—but overall, most parents and employers who use the scheme believe that the system works, and an overwhelming majority want it to stay. There is another fact check.

It is not really surprising that the Government are planning to pass regulations this evening that would close the scheme to new applicants, particularly considering their shambolic introduction of the alternative tax-free childcare scheme. The Government’s much-awaited tax-free childcare scheme opened to parents this year, a full five years since it was originally announced. *[Interruption.]* That is another fact that Conservative Members do

[Peter Dowd]

not like. To call the roll-out disastrous would be a grave understatement. On top of the delays, HMRC's website crashed, forcing the Government to pay nearly £1 million to parents in lieu of childcare payments. Hardly a great start! Under the current voucher system, the amount of childcare a family gets is tied to their earnings. Under the new system, it is based instead on expenditure, so the childcare system will benefit those who can afford to spend the most, with the Government's headline figure of £2,000 tax free reserved for those parents who have an extra £10,000 lying around.

It is well known that the tax-free childcare scheme is the pet project of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. She has consistently called for better value for money when it comes to public spending and said that the Government should avoid spending money that they do not have. However, under the new scheme, parents sending their children to independent schools will also be able to claim the £2,000 tax-free amount for childcare. How can the Chief Secretary justify that? Surely, the money spent giving a tax break to those who can afford to send their children to some of the most expensive fee-paying schools in the country could instead be used to ensure that a million children do not lose access to free school meals. There is no reason why the Government should not listen to the calls of the Opposition, of parents and of employers across the country who want to keep the voucher scheme open and extend it to the self-employed.

I should like to turn now to the Local Authority (Duty to Secure Early Years Provision Free of Charge) (Amendment) Regulations 2018 and the Universal Credit (Miscellaneous Amendments, Saving and Transitional Provision) Regulations 2018. As we have heard, the first of these instruments creates new eligibility criteria for families applying for 15 hours of free childcare for their two-year-old through universal credit—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman is not going to give way. Please allow him to finish.

Peter Dowd: The facts do rile them, don't they? They have asked for facts all afternoon. Then they get a few and they just don't like them. I shall be coming to a close very shortly. It is as simple as this. Fortunately, at least the public now have a clear choice between the two parties: a Government of the past wedded to a failed ideological nightmare, or a Labour party that will govern for the many, not the few. Finally, is there any vulnerable group or person that this self-obsessed, clapped-out, washed-out, out-of-time Government are not prepared to attack?

5.45 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): There are sometimes days when Ministers have to come to this House to defend difficult decisions that have had to be made, but this is not one of those days. Today, we are talking about increasing spending and widening eligibility. I would never dream of accusing any Member on either side of seeking to mislead the House, but I will make a more general point: the mere repetition of a falsehood does not turn it into the truth.

We have had fully 24 Back-Bench speeches in this debate, and I will seek to respond to as many as I can in the short time available. There are five main elements to our support in early years and childcare, and each one is a bigger offer than under Labour. First, there are 15 hours a week of free early education for disadvantaged two-year-olds. There was no such entitlement under Labour. Today's regulations amend the eligibility criteria, introducing an equivalent earnings threshold of £15,400, which typically equates to somewhere between £24,000 and £32,000 in total household income. By 2023, we estimate that around 7,000 more children will benefit from the entitlement compared with the previous system.

Secondly, there is the universal 15 hours a week free childcare for three and four-year-olds—more hours than under Labour and now with the early years pupil premium, which was also not available under Labour. Thirdly, there are an additional 15 hours for working parents, and guess what? No such offer existed before 2010. Fourthly, up to 85% of childcare costs can be reimbursed through universal credit, which is a higher percentage than was ever available under tax credits. Finally, tax-free childcare will provide support for nearly 1 million more families than the existing vouchers scheme.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Given the concerns raised across the House about the April closure of the childcare vouchers scheme, does the Secretary of State agree that the closure should be delayed to allow for those concerns to be addressed?

Damian Hinds: I have heard the concerns about the timing, and I can confirm that, following the hon. Lady's representations, we will be able to keep the voucher scheme open to new entrants for a further six months.

Tax-free childcare will mean that more people become eligible, regardless of their employer and including the self-employed for the first time. The hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) raised concerns about families having to pay childcare costs up front, but I reassure her that the flexible support fund is available to help in such cases.

Lucy Powell: Will the Secretary of State give way on that point?

Damian Hinds: I am short of time, so if the hon. Lady will forgive me, I will come back to her if there is time.

Turning to free school meals, we have extended the availability of free meals since 2010, going much further than Labour. The Conservative-led coalition extended free meals to disadvantaged students in further education institutions and introduced universal infant free school meals. We are investing £26 million in a breakfast club programme over the next three years, using the soft drinks industry levy.

When universal credit was introduced, we made clear our intention to set new criteria for free school meals, as my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) rightly pointed out. We stated that intention in our response to the Social Security Advisory Committee report on passported benefits in March 2012. We repeated it in April 2013, when we introduced a temporary measure enabling all universal credit families to receive free school meals during the early phase of universal credit, and we have repeated it again several times since,

as my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) mentioned. We are now, as we always planned, introducing new eligibility criteria to ensure that those entitlements continue to benefit those who need them the most.

Under our new regulations, we estimate that by 2022 around 50,000 more children will benefit from a free school meal compared with the previous system. The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who is shaking her head, asked about the methodology, as did the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) and, I believe, the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock). We responded to the Social Security Advisory Committee on that exact point, and it put the information into the public domain.

Lucy Powell: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Damian Hinds: I cannot. No child who is receiving free meals now or who gained them during the roll-out of universal credit will lose their entitlement during the roll-out, even if family earnings rise above the threshold, as my hon. Friends the Members for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) and for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) mentioned. Once roll-out is complete, those children will be protected until the end of their phase of education—primary or secondary—as my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) reminded us.

The protection arrangements will enable hundreds of thousands of children to continue to receive a meal during the roll-out, even if family earnings exceed the threshold. The £7,400 threshold relates to earned income, and it does not include additional incomings through universal credit. Depending on their exact circumstances, a typical family earning around our threshold would have a total annual household income of between £18,000 and £24,000.

The hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) said that the threshold was arbitrary. It is not arbitrary; the thresholds for these passported benefits are set at such a level as to hold the eligibility cohort steady, except that in the case of free school meals we took the decision to make it somewhat more generous than the previous system. The threshold is comparable, by the way, to that in the approach in Scotland, where there is a net earnings threshold equivalent of £7,320.

It is simply not true to say that we are introducing a cliff edge; there has always been one. The simple fact is that a child either gets a lunch or does not. A plate of food does not lend itself well to being tapered, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) has said. Some have suggested that we could convert the benefit into cash—that is true, of course—so that we could have a taper, but the whole point of free school meals is to guarantee that an individual child will receive a nutritious and healthy lunch.

Extending eligibility to all children in households on universal credit would result in around half of pupils becoming eligible. We estimate that that would cost in excess of £3 billion a year more by 2022. The additional meal costs alone, excepting the deprivation funding, would be in excess of £450 million a year—quite close to the figure mentioned by the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West. I reiterate that eligibility is going up, not down, as my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) said.

I am running short of time, so I will turn to the regulations on universal credit. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions earlier outlined the changes in these regulations for UC. They include the removal of waiting days, which will put an average of £160 extra in people's pockets and get them into the monthly routine sooner, and an additional two weeks of housing benefit to smooth the transition to universal credit. That one-off, additional, non-recoverable payment is worth an average of £233 to 2.3 million claimants over the roll-out period. Those measures form part of the £1.5 billion package of reforms that the Chancellor announced at the Budget. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) said that he was surprised to hear that Labour Members would be voting against those measures. I suggest that their constituents will be even more surprised.

Paul Masterton: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Damian Hinds: I hope my hon. Friend will forgive me if I do not; we are very short of time. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) reminded us in her unique style, the Government are committed to tackling injustices, removing barriers and widening opportunity. Because of the strong economic management that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor recapped for us earlier, we are able to continue our bold and ambitious programme of social reform extremely quickly.

Emma Little Pengelly: Can the Secretary of State confirm clearly for the House—this is very important—that the six-month delay in the closure of the childcare voucher scheme will be used to address concerns and issues that have been raised in the House today?

Damian Hinds: I already confirmed that we would have this period to reflect concerns and to allow the bed-in.

Our approach is working, including through advances in education, ensuring everyone can get the best start, unprecedented investment in childcare to support career choices and household budgets and universal credit, helping people into work, faster. In this generation, we have employment at record levels, household incomes at record levels and income inequality down. For the next generation, we have major improvements in the early years foundation stages, 1.9 million more children in good or outstanding schools and a 10% narrowing in attainment between the rich and poor. Today's legislation continues this important work. I am proud of the enhanced support we are offering families through these programmes, and I commend the regulations to the House.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 288, Noes 315.

Division No. 128]

[5.55 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian

Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy

Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brake, rh Tom
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cable, rh Sir Vince
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Mr Alan
 Campbell, Mr Ronnie
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Douglas
 Chapman, Jenny
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clwyd, rh Ann
 Coaker, Vernon
 Coffey, Ann
 Cooper, Julie
 Cooper, Rosie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Coyle, Neil
 Crausby, Sir David
 Crawley, Angela
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Dakin, Nic
 Davey, rh Sir Edward
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 De Piero, Gloria
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dent Coad, Emma
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Dromey, Jack
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellman, Mrs Louise
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farrelly, Paul
 Field, rh Frank
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Fovargue, Yvonne

Frith, James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gaffney, Hugh
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 George, Ruth
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Goodman, Helen
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Gray, Neil
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Grogan, John
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanson, rh David
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hermon, Lady
 Hill, Mike
 Hillier, Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hoey, Kate
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Hosie, Stewart
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham P.
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, Mr Kevan
 Jones, Sarah
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Killen, Ged
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Laird, Lesley
 Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Lee, Karen
 Leslie, Mr Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Linden, David

Lloyd, Stephen
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mann, John
 Marsden, Gordon
 Martin, Sandy
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 O'Mara, Jared
 Onasanya, Fiona
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pidcock, Laura
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rashid, Faisal
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel

Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Danielle
 Ruane, Chris
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughtera, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Laura
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sweeney, Mr Paul
 Tami, Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Umunna, Chuka
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Thelma
 Watson, Tom
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitfield, Martin
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Dr Paul
 Williamson, Chris
 Wilson, Phil
 Wishart, Pete
 Woodcock, John
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Jeff Smith

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter

Allan, Lucy
 Allen, Heidi
 Amess, Sir David
 Andrew, Stuart

Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, Stephen
 Baron, Mr John
 Bebb, Guto
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benyon, rh Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Boles, Nick
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, Conor
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, Colin
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Cox, Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Dodds, rh Nigel
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain

Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evennett, rh David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Sir Michael
 Fernandes, Suella
 Field, rh Mark
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, rh Mr David
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goldsmith, Zac
 Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Luke
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Bill
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Hair, Kirstene
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Simon
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Howell, John
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, rh Mr Nick
 Jack, Mr Alister
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil

Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Jenkins, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kerr, Stephen
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Lancaster, rh Mark
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Little Pengelly, Emma
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Maclean, Rachel
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Masterton, Paul
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Ms Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moore, Damien
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti

Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perry, rh Claire
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin

Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John

Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Wendy Morton and
Mike Freer

Question accordingly negatived.

6.10 pm

More than three hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the motions, the Deputy Speaker put the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Order, 8 March).

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PERSONS

Motion made, and Question put,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Free School Lunches and Milk, and School and Early Years Finance (Amendments Relating to Universal Credit) (England) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 148), dated 6 February, a copy of which was laid before this House on 7 February, be annulled.—
(*Angela Rayner.*)

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I remind the House that this motion is subject to double-majority voting: of the whole House and of Members representing constituencies in England.

The House having divided: Ayes 254, Noes 312.

Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England:
Ayes 214, Noes 282.

Division No. 129]

[6.10 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	Charalambous, Bambos
Abrahams, Debbie	Clwyd, rh Ann
Alexander, Heidi	Coaker, Vernon
Ali, Rushanara	Coffey, Ann
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Cooper, Julie
Amesbury, Mike	Cooper, Rosie
Ashworth, Jonathan	Cooper, rh Yvette
Austin, Ian	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Coyle, Neil
Barron, rh Sir Kevin	Crausby, Sir David
Beckett, rh Margaret	Creasy, Stella
Benn, rh Hilary	Cruddas, Jon
Blomfield, Paul	Cryer, John
Brabin, Tracy	Cummins, Judith
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Cunningham, Alex
Brake, rh Tom	Cunningham, Mr Jim
Brennan, Kevin	Dakin, Nic
Brown, Lyn	Davey, rh Sir Edward
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	David, Wayne
Buck, Ms Karen	Davies, Geraint
Burden, Richard	De Cordova, Marsha
Burgon, Richard	De Piero, Gloria
Byrne, rh Liam	Debbonaire, Thangam
Cable, rh Sir Vince	Dent Coad, Emma
Cadbury, Ruth	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Dodds, Anneliese
Campbell, Mr Ronnie	Doughty, Stephen
Carden, Dan	Dowd, Peter
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Dromey, Jack
Champion, Sarah	Duffield, Rosie
Chapman, Jenny	Eagle, Ms Angela

Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David

Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
O'Mara, Jared
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillipson, Bridget
Pidcock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd

Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick

Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Jeff Smith

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William

Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David

Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heapey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph

Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca

Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, rh Mel

Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Jo Churchill and
Mike Freer

Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Blomfield, Paul
 Brabin, Tracy
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brake, rh Tom
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brown, Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cable, rh Sir Vince
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Mr Alan
 Campbell, Mr Ronnie
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Jenny
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Clwyd, rh Ann
 Coaker, Vernon
 Coffey, Ann
 Cooper, Julie
 Cooper, Rosie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Coyle, Neil
 Crausby, Sir David
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Dakin, Nic
 Davey, rh Sir Edward
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 De Cordova, Marsha
 De Piero, Gloria
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dent Coad, Emma
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Dromey, Jack
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellman, Mrs Louise
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farrelly, Paul
 Farron, Tim
 Field, rh Frank
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Frith, James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gaffney, Hugh
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry

George, Ruth
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Goodman, Helen
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Grogan, John
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanson, rh David
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hermon, Lady
 Hill, Mike
 Hillier, Meg
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hoey, Kate
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham P.
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, Mr Kevan
 Jones, Sarah
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Killen, Ged
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Laird, Lesley
 Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Lee, Karen
 Leslie, Mr Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Lloyd, Stephen
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mann, John
 Marsden, Gordon
 Martin, Sandy
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian

Question accordingly negated.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PERSONS

Motion made, and Question put,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Local Authority (Duty to Secure Early Years Provision Free of Charge) (Amendment) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 146), dated 6 February, a copy of which was laid before this House on 7 February, be annulled.—(*Angela Rayner.*)

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I remind the House that this motion is subject to double-majority voting: of the whole House and of Members representing constituencies in England.

The House having divided: Ayes 253, Noes 315.

Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England:
 Ayes 215, Noes 283.

Division No. 130]

[6.26 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Alexander, Heidi
 Ali, Rushanara
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike
 Ashworth, Jonathan
 Austin, Ian
 Bailey, Mr Adrian
 Barron, rh Sir Kevin

McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Norris, Alex
 O'Mara, Jared
 Onasanya, Fiona
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pidcock, Laura
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rashid, Faisal
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Danielle
 Ruane, Chris
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd

Ryan, rh Joan
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sherriff, Paula
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Laura
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sweeney, Mr Paul
 Tami, Mark
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Umunna, Chuka
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Thelma
 Watson, Tom
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitfield, Martin
 Williams, Dr Paul
 Williamson, Chris
 Wilson, Phil
 Woodcock, John
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Jeff Smith

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Allen, Heidi
 Amess, Sir David
 Andrew, Stuart
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, Stephen
 Baron, Mr John
 Bebb, Guto

Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benyon, rh Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Boles, Nick
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, rh James

Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, Conor
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, Colin
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Cox, Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Dodds, rh Nigel
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evannett, rh David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Sir Michael
 Fernandes, Suella
 Field, rh Mark
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, rh Mr David
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goldsmith, Zac

Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Luke
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Bill
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Hair, Kirstene
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Simon
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Howell, John
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, rh Mr Nick
 Jack, Mr Alister
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kerr, Stephen
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Lancaster, rh Mark
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon

Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Little Pengelly, Emma
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Maclean, Rachel
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Masterton, Paul
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Ms Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moore, Damien
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perry, rh Claire
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee

Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Mims Davies and
Kelly Tolhurst

Question accordingly negated.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Motion made, and Question put,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Social Security (Contributions) (Amendment) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 120), dated 31 January, a copy of which was laid before this House on 1 February, be annulled.—(*Angela Rayner.*)

The House divided: Ayes 285, Noes 314.

Division No. 131]

[6.40 pm]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Alexander, Heidi
 Ali, Rushanara
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike
 Ashworth, Jonathan
 Austin, Ian
 Bailey, Mr Adrian
 Bardell, Hannah
 Barron, rh Sir Kevin
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blomfield, Paul
 Brabin, Tracy
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brake, rh Tom
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Richard
 Cable, rh Sir Vince
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Mr Alan
 Campbell, Mr Ronnie
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Douglas
 Chapman, Jenny
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clwyd, rh Ann
 Coaker, Vernon
 Coffey, Ann
 Cooper, Julie
 Cooper, Rosie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Coyle, Neil
 Crausby, Sir David
 Crawley, Angela
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Dakin, Nic
 Davey, rh Sir Edward

David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 De Piero, Gloria
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dent Coad, Emma
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Dromey, Jack
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellman, Mrs Louise
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farrelly, Paul
 Farron, Tim
 Field, rh Frank
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Frith, James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gaffney, Hugh
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 George, Ruth
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Goodman, Helen
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Gray, Neil
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Grogan, John
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanson, rh David
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John

Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hermon, Lady
 Hill, Mike
 Hillier, Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hoey, Kate
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Hosie, Stewart
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham P.
 Jones, Mr Kevan
 Jones, Sarah
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Killen, Ged
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Laird, Lesley
 Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Lee, Karen
 Leslie, Mr Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Stephen
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mann, John
 Marsden, Gordon
 Martin, Sandy
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Mearns, Ian

Miliband, rh Edward
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 O'Mara, Jared
 Onasanya, Fiona
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pidcock, Laura
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rashid, Faisal
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Danielle
 Ruane, Chris
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Laura
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeter, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sweeney, Mr Paul
 Tami, Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily

Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Umunna, Chuka
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Thelma
 Watson, Tom
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt

Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitfield, Martin
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Dr Paul
 Williamson, Chris
 Wilson, Phil
 Wishart, Pete
 Woodcock, John
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Jeff Smith

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Allen, Heidi
 Amess, Sir David
 Andrew, Stuart
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, Stephen
 Baron, Mr John
 Bebb, Guto
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benyon, rh Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Boles, Nick
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, Conor
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, Colin
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto

Courts, Robert
 Cox, Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinanage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Dodds, rh Nigel
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evennett, rh David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Sir Michael
 Fernandes, Suella
 Field, rh Mark
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Franco, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, rh Mr David
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goldsmith, Zac
 Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Luke
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Bill
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Grayling, rh Chris

Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Hair, Kirstene
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Simon
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Howell, John
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, rh Mr Nick
 Jack, Mr Alister
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kerr, Stephen
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Lancaster, rh Mark
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Little Pengelly, Emma
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan

Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Maclean, Rachel
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Masterton, Paul
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Ms Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moore, Damien
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perry, rh Claire
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok

Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael

Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:

Kelly Tolhurst and
 Mims Davies

Question accordingly negated.

Angela Rayner: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is clear that the Secretary of State has survived the Division by promising not to press ahead with the Government's plans to phase out childcare vouchers for another six months, along with other new childcare measures. May I ask your opinion, Mr Speaker, on any suggestion from the Government that there will be an oral statement explaining what will now happen during and after that period?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her attempted point of order, but I am afraid that her attempt to solicit my opinion will not be successful. I am not aware of any intention for a statement to be made, but the hon. Lady has aired her concern, and it is therefore on the record for all to see.

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last week the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport announced his intention to drop the Leveson inquiry despite new revelations from *The Sunday Times* whistleblower John Ford, including the obtaining of stolen data on the private information of Dr David Kelly a week before his death. The Secretary of State justified the decision by saying that

"the fact that this activity stopped in 2010 underlines the point that the world has changed. Practices such as these have been investigated. Newspapers today are in a very different position from when the alleged offences took place."—[*Official Report*, 7 March 2018; Vol. 637, c. 326.]

I have just received new allegations that contradict that information. The blagger says that he knows individuals who are still engaged in these activities on behalf of newspapers. The Secretary of State has no evidential basis on which to make his rather complacent assertion.

Have you had notice of a statement from the Secretary of State, Mr Speaker, so that he can justify what evidence he has to say that blagging ended in national newspapers in 2010?

Mr Speaker: I have not received any such indication, I must advise the hon. Gentleman, but he has registered his concern and it will have been heard on the Treasury Bench.

Hemel Hempstead Urgent Care Centre

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

6.56 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): First, may I say what a privilege it is to have secured this Adjournment debate this evening, and how proud I am of my constituents who for so many years have been fighting the changes and particularly the cuts to healthcare in the Dacorum area where my constituency sits? In particular, I thank Edie and Ron Glatter and the Dacorum Hospital Action Group and its fantastic chair Betty Harris, who is very poorly; they have been fighting this campaign for many years. I also pay tribute to the fantastic work our local BBC radio station, BBC Three Counties, has done over the years, in particular that of the excellent journalist and reporter Justin Dealey; without his work, this debate would probably not have taken place.

For the national health service to carry on being the world-class service it is today, the public, our constituents, need to have faith not only in the fantastic doctors, nurses and porters and those who run the frontline services, but in the management of our hospitals and health provision. I am sorry to say, however, that the trust and feeling of commitment we need from our health service management in our part of the world are not just broken, but have completely failed.

I will not go into the history because tonight I want to talk about the urgent care centre, but the history of what has been happening to out-of-hours and urgent care, including A&E, in my constituency has been going on for many years. The previous Labour Administration decided to close the A&E and all acute services at the Hemel hospital after they had already been closed at the St Albans hospital, with all services moved into a Victorian hospital next to a football ground in Watford. We will not dwell on that tonight, however, but will come back to it on another evening.

As part of the sop to my community, we were given an urgent care centre—24/7, seven days a week, throughout the day and night—and next to it a walk-in GP centre. I was therefore surprised when Ms Fisher, chief executive of the West Hertfordshire Hospitals Trust, phoned me just before Christmas to say that, sadly, the urgent care centre would have to temporarily close on safety grounds at night. I was shocked by that, not least because the A&E in Watford struggles greatly, so the more people we can encourage to use other NHS facilities instead, the better. I said, “This is happening over Christmas which is one of the busy times,” and was told, “Don’t worry, Mr Penning, it’s only a temporary thing and we’ll have it open again just after Christmas.” They then put out a press release headed “Temporary overnight closure of Hemel Hempstead Urgent Care Centre”. Interestingly, that press release is still on their website today. I actually printed it off before I came into the Chamber this evening. As I go through my comments, Members will realise just how false that statement was.

One of my constituents then contacted Three Counties Radio, and Justin Dealey, its excellent reporter—

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

Sir Mike Penning: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I have even longer to pontificate, which is great news.

Justin Dealey acquired an interview with the said Ms Fisher, the chief executive of West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust. It was quite a long interview, in which Ms Fisher indicated:

“This is a short-term measure which is us acting in the interest of patient safety because, for the next few weeks over the festive period, we are unable to secure GP cover.”

I think most people would understand that, but not if they knew that the GPs were working in the room next door. But that is a separate issue. Justin went on to suggest that surely Ms Fisher understood that local constituents would have real concerns, and asked her whether she would be concerned if she lived in the area. She said:

“I completely understand their concerns, but what I want to reassure the residents of Hemel is that if there were to be any permanent change it would be our absolute intention to include people fully”

in that decision. She went on to say that

“legally we would be obliged to consult for a permanent change of that nature.”

That press release was issued not before Christmas this year but in December 2016. We have had no night provision at all in Hemel since then. Everybody has to go for urgent treatment to Watford A&E. Alternatively, they have to dial 111, which is an excellent service, but after they have been triaged they apparently get sent to Watford A&E. Watford has just come out of special measures, and I praise the work that has been done at the hospital but there is still a lot more to be done.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. I sought his permission to intervene on him beforehand. He is outlining very well the issue with the Hemel Hempstead urgent care centre. Does he agree that, although there is immense staffing pressure, closing or scaling back on urgent care units and minor injury units only adds to the pressure on A&Es? There must be more investment in these mid-level centres if we are to prevent the A&Es from crumbling under the weight of the work they have to do.

Sir Mike Penning: I clearly agree with my hon. Friend. It was kind of him to come and tell me that he wanted to intervene on me on behalf of other parts of the country that are facing similar pressures.

This was not about money. Normally, when our constituents come to talk to us, especially about the health service, it is about money. They tell us that they are really concerned that there is not enough money to provide the services, but on this occasion we were told that this was nothing to do with money. It was to do with the contractual problem with the GPs. We kept on asking what was going to happen, and then—completely out of the blue and still without consultation—we were told that the Government had said that there should be no more urgent care centres and that they should become urgent treatment centres instead. I was repeatedly told that it was the Government saying that this should be done. I asked whether the Government had said that the centre should not be open 24/7. I was told no, but that we had to move to being an urgent treatment centre. In the past couple of weeks, the unit has changed from being an urgent care centre to being an urgent treatment

centre. Interestingly enough, that means that paramedics and nurse practitioners are running the facility, and in many cases—without being rude to our GPs—they have more skills than a basic GP. I have to declare an interest, in that I was a military paramedic, so I am slightly biased about these things.

Was there a consultation before that decision was made, not just to close the UCC but to change to a UTC? No, there was not, even though it is a legal requirement to have one. We are now in a consultation, however. I could not believe it when I first heard this, but I have now heard from several constituents that in the actual meetings that took place—not when people were writing in—when different plans and options were being put to my constituents, a member of the clinical commissioning group staff was at the table trying to convince the public what sort of option they should go for. If we are going to consult the public, surely we should trust them and then have the confidence to listen to them.

What I find really fascinating about what is happening in my part of the world is that people from nowhere near my constituency—from the other side of Watford—are being consulted. They would never come to my facility in a million years—unless they just happen to be in the area—but they apparently have the same rights in this consultation as my constituents, who are again losing facilities hand over fist. Those other views are being taken into consideration because they happen to be part of the trust area. My constituents just scratch their heads and say, “This is illogical.” This facility, even though it is part of the NHS and anybody could come to it, is obviously being used by the largest town in Hertfordshire and the other towns and villages within Dacorum. However, I have no problem with the people of St Albans being consulted over this, because they are clearly part of the process.

Trust has been severely damaged. A highly paid chief executive of an NHS trust went on the radio—telling an MP is one thing, but going public is another—and tells listeners, “This is temporary. Please do not worry; it will all be okay. By the way, if I did actually change the service, that would be illegal because I have not consulted.” Frankly, when they then did not consult—the UCC is quite clearly never going to open again—that breaks the trust.

I have raised the accountability issue in the House before. It is absolutely right that my good friend the Minister on the Front Bench does not make decisions about what A&Es and UCCs are open and how many beds there should be. Those are quite clearly clinical decisions that should be based on knowledge and demand in the area—that is not what happened when our A&E was closed—but we seem to have moved from one extreme to another. I am told that if we want to challenge the consultation, the only way is to put the decision to judicial review based on the consultation. We tried that when the A&E was closed and we got a judicial review. The judge was generous and said, “You have a moral case, but you probably don’t have a clinical case. You don’t have a case in law, because the consultation was done.” However, if the consultation was a complete sham or did not take place at all, where do we go?

I have asked Ministers, I have tabled questions and I have been to see the Secretary of State. At the end of the day, who are these people accountable to? I know that

we can go to the health committees at the local council, but they do not have the powers to say that an individual or a trust has brought the NHS into disrepute, and yet that is what has happened here. Nobody was twisting the chief executive's arm to go on the radio and say what she said. We all listened to it—I got a transcript the following morning—and I sat with Justin and said, “Well, that's it, Justin. We're okay.” I was not at all happy about the facility being closed over the 2016 Christmas period, but at least we knew that GPs were going to be recruited and that we were going to get there.

However, the exact opposite has happened. We are not getting the GPs back, and now the facility being open 24 hours a day is only one of the options. I know that the Minister's notes will say how many people used to go to it at night and so on, but half the problem was that it was never properly promoted. There are access issues at the A&E because so many people are turning up and being triaged when a huge percentage of them do not need to be at an A&E but somewhere else within the NHS. I would argue that they should be at a UCC or UTC or that a GP should come out to them, but that is a separate issue because hardly any GPs make home visits in my constituency.

I know exactly how things work, because I was a Minister for a while and know about the advice that comes down from the trust and the clinical commissioning group, which will say things that are different from what I have said. However, I can honestly say that if there is one issue in my constituency that absolutely unites every political persuasion on my patch, it is the acute health provision in my constituency. We pushed a coffin on a hospital trolley all the way from Hemel Hempstead Hospital to Watford, to indicate that lives would be lost. We had debate after debate with the ambulance service, which said, “Don't worry, we can get the ambulances there on time.” It probably could, if it rushed them through on a blue light in the middle of the night—if an ambulance was available. Because of the previous Administration's botching of the regionalisation of the ambulance service, there are often not that many ambulances available, even though the ambulance depot is on my patch.

People do not want to clog up A&E; they want to have the confidence that there is somewhere safe that they and their kids can go for treatment. We have no idea what the conclusion of this retrospective consultation will be. We have no faith that even if the conclusions are in agreement with what we want, we will actually get it. Not all my constituents agree with me, but in a treatment centre I would rather have a highly qualified paramedic nurse practitioner than—I have to choose my words carefully here—an ordinary GP, simply because the paramedic nurse practitioner has so much experience in that area. That is where the modernisation of the health service has been so brilliant. But after telling me that the decision was not about money, it is, frankly, disgusting to sit people down at consultation meetings and try to convince them that it would be better if the centre was not open 24 hours a day.

I hope that the Minister understands how passionate we are about the matter. My constituency is 17 minutes from London and it shares a boundary with yours, Mr Speaker. People in the top part of my constituency all go to Luton and Dunstable—quite rightly so; it is an

excellent facility—and those in the bottom part of my constituency, or anyone who comes off the M1 and the M25, end up going to Watford for their acute care.

I want Watford General Hospital to succeed. I think the location of the site is completely ludicrous, and we need a new general hospital for the growing population in our part of the world. I know that you have pressures on housing, Mr Speaker, as we have. But I want the houses, because I want people to have somewhere to live—so many families are struggling at the moment—and if we are to build those houses, we need facilities, such as schools and everything else. When my constituents go to bed at night, they need to know that the urgent care centre is open in case something happens; and that if they cannot cope, we can blue-light them to Watford or to Luton and Dunstable.

I have tried for weeks and weeks to get this Adjournment debate. My hon. Friend the Minister is lucky, because I had been asking for a 60-minute debate in Westminster Hall. We may yet end up there, but that will depend a lot on what he says from the Dispatch Box.

7.12 pm

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): I will do my best to address the issues raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) in order to pre-empt the further debate to which he alludes. I congratulate him on securing this debate. I commend him for his continuing and passionate campaign on behalf of his constituents, and for his expertise on health issues, which he has brought once again to the House.

I reiterate the fundamental principle for all service change in the NHS: it should be based on clear evidence that it will deliver better outcomes for patients. That is the framework that is applied. I understand that my right hon. Friend is concerned about the changes proposed in his constituency. He will appreciate, not least as a former Minister, that I cannot say anything that would prejudice the outcome of the ongoing consultation, but he has spoken powerfully about his concerns in the House tonight.

I am sure that my right hon. Friend agrees that any decision should be driven by what is best for the constituency clinically, by what is best for the health service in the area, and by what is of most benefit to the greatest number of people in the area. I shall briefly set out some of the background, as I understand it, to the issues that inform the consultation. As he mentioned, in December 2016, the urgent care centre was temporarily closed overnight because of concerns about patient safety as a result of problems with staffing the GP overnight shifts. The CCG's advice was that the urgent need to address patient safety issues did not allow time for consultation about that temporary change. I appreciate the concern that he raised about the manner in which that decision was taken.

The local NHS has worked hard to manage the consequences of the decision. I understand from the CCG that the volume of overnight patients at the centre was relatively low, and that the impact that has been felt at Watford General Hospital, notwithstanding the other challenges it faces, has been of the order of one or two patients per night, usually those with relatively minor injuries. As my right hon. Friend will be aware, emergency cases have been sent to Watford since the closure of

[Stephen Barclay]

Hemel Hempstead's A&E in 2009—he referred to the protest involving a coffin about that decision, which was taken under the previous Labour Government. On provision in the early hours of the morning, he will also be aware that journey times then will be shorter than they would be at the times when the urgent care centres are open.

Sir Mike Penning: Let me go back a fraction. If the decision has to be based on clinical advice—I understand the principle—what is the point of consulting the public, who are not clinically trained? We have to consult them, because that is what the law says, so is the law wrong for saying we should consult people who are not clinically trained? If the decision has already been made, what is the point?

Stephen Barclay: The public consultation is to inform the discussion with clinicians. If such a decision were taken by Ministers—my right hon. Friend alluded to this in his remarks—it would likewise be informed by public consultation. That is part of running a transparent and open process.

The CCG is now consulting the public on future opening hours, following a broader urgent care strategy review. The consultation seeks views on three options: retaining the current temporary hours; increasing the temporary hours by two hours at the end of the day; or re-opening on a 24-hour basis. As it runs until 28 March, I know that my right hon. Friend and his constituents will wish to share their views as part of the process.

I do understand the criticism made by my right hon. Friend's constituents that the overnight closure has been dragging on for too long and that a final decision needs to be made as soon as possible. The views gathered during the current consultation will inform the CCG's decisions about the future opening hours for Hemel Hempstead UTC, as well as about the contract for West Herts medical centre. I further understand that the CCG has commissioned an independent research company to review and analyse all the comments received, and the feedback will be compiled into a summary report. That will be presented to the Herts Valleys CCG board meeting, in public, on 26 April, when a decision on both issues will be made.

Turning to the issue of the treatment centre's status, on 1 December 2017, Hemel Hempstead UCC changed to a UTC, as part of national measures introduced by NHS England. I understand from the CCG that this was a change of name, not of service. The CCG therefore did not carry out a further consultation on the establishment of the UTC as it did not feel that that represented a significant change in service. I understand that no services have been withdrawn from the UTC, but there have been a number of enhancements, including: the introduction of a number of bookable appointments through NHS 111; the addition of near patient testing for some conditions, reducing waiting times and reducing the need for patients to attend Watford General Hospital for some tests; and an improved IT system, meaning that medical staff will be able to access patients' records if they give consent. The CCG also expects services to expand to include other professionals, such as pharmacists, emergency care practitioners, those providing access to mental health services and community nursing staff.

That also dovetails with some important changes in planned care locally. I understand from the CCG that improvements in the treatment of musculoskeletal disease mean that the single point of access triage at Hemel can direct people on to community physio, where that meets their needs. That is good for the individual patient and also ensures that capacity in the acute settings is able to concentrate on those with more complex needs.

Sir Mike Penning: The Minister has just told the House that there has been a complete change in how physiotherapy is provided—it was provided at the hospital and is now provided elsewhere. There was no consultation on that, although I understand that there was a requirement to do so, because this involved a complete change of service in respect of where people go and so on. The point I am trying to make is: when there is no consultation, what do we do? Do we just sit back and say, "Okay"? Some kind of measure has to be taken when consultation continually gets ignored or does not happen at all.

Stephen Barclay: The distinction that was being drawn was in respect of services that have been removed, on which my right hon. Friend is right that there is a legal requirement for a consultation. He has expressed to the House his concerns about the process by which that temporary decision on patient safety was taken. The point I was making was that the services that have been brought to the area are bringing a benefit to the local community. I would have thought that they would be welcomed. Indeed, from April, many patients with diabetes in the area will no longer need to travel to Watford to be seen by a consultant, because the consultants will be coming to them by working in the community. Again, that is good for patients and for the system as a whole. It is part of the way in which these systems evolve: some services come closer to the community, while others, as under the decision taken by the Labour Government in 2009, are rationalised into Watford A&E.

I understand my right hon. Friend's frustration that in his view the local CCG seems out of touch with popular opinion. Given the way in which he champions the community that he represents, I know that he is not out of touch with popular opinion—he always speaks in a well-informed way about his constituents' needs, and I would expect that to be represented in the consultation responses that the CCG receives. The CCG is accountable to NHS England for fulfilling its functions. It is also a member of the health and wellbeing board, at which local authorities and other partners can challenge how it has been fulfilling its functions. The CCG's activities are subject to scrutiny by local authorities and to supervision by NHS England. If NHS England believes that the CCG is failing to discharge its functions, it has the power to intervene and issue directions, or to replace the accountable officer.

It is worth reiterating that all proposed service changes should meet the four tests for service change. They should have support from GP commissioners; be based on clinical evidence; demonstrate public and patient engagement; and consider patient choice. It is right that such matters are addressed locally, where local healthcare needs are best understood, rather than in Whitehall. I think my right hon. Friend recognised the point about Ministers not making clinical-led decisions. For those reasons, I am sure that he will appreciate that I am not

able to offer the House an opinion on the merits of the proposals, but of course we recognise that changes to health services inspire passionate debate, as they should, from all quarters, as we have seen this evening.

There is no standard approach on what an urgent care centre should offer. The offer varies between different urgent care centres, depending on the services required locally. Urgent care centres can treat a range of injuries, including sprains, strains and broken bones.

Sir Mike Penning: I want to help the Minister. The urgent care centre is gone. We do not have an urgent care centre; it is now an urgent treatment centre. This is something that confuses my constituents as well. I was trying to make two points. First, it is not just about the clinical commissioning group on its own. The decision to close over Christmas in 2016 was made by West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust, and it cannot escape blame, because it was the trust's chief executive who made that decision and went on and acted. Secondly, it is also about the lack of knowledge and understanding of the community. We have had a churn of people coming through and running the services. They seem to come and go and come and go, never understanding or empathising with the constituency.

Stephen Barclay: Before my right hon. Friend's intervention, I was just coming to the urgent treatment centre, because there is obviously a distinction. Urgent treatment centres are about standardising the range of options and simplifying the system so that patients know where to go and have clarity about which services are on offer. My right hon. Friend made the point about how we direct footfall and constituents into services at the right point to reduce the demand on the A&E at Watford by simplifying what the UTC does, what it offers and how that is understood by constituents.

Patients and the public will be able to access urgent treatment centres that are open for 12 hours a day, and that are GP-led and staffed by a range of clinicians with access to simple diagnostics. They will have a consistent route to access urgent appointments offered within four hours and booked through NHS 111, ambulance services and general practice. A walk-in access option will also be retained. They will increasingly be able to access routine and same-day appointments, and out-of-hours

general practice for both urgent and routine appointments at the same facility where geographically appropriate. UTCs are also part of a locally integrated urgent and emergency care service working in conjunction with the ambulance service, NHS 111, local GPs, hospital A&E services and other local providers.

In conclusion, these are important issues, and decisions should not be taken lightly. The location of services is a difficult and often controversial issue, and my right hon. Friend is to be commended for his campaign and the points that he has made on behalf of his constituents.

Sir Mike Penning: It is not often that we get more time to speak in this place, so while I have the Minister at the Dispatch Box, can he answer this very simple question: what recourse is there for me, as the MP, and for my constituents when we are misled—I know that I have privilege, but I am using the word “misled”—by a senior NHS management team about what is going to happen to the urgent care service? I am talking about when what the team says turns out to be completely untrue. What recourse is there so that we can start to rebuild some trust in my constituency?

Stephen Barclay: As my right hon. Friend knows, it would be inappropriate for a Minister to comment on a specific allegation such as that from the Dispatch Box. I cannot comment on this specific consultation, which is under way as we speak. The point that has come out of this debate is that the decision of December 2016 was taken on patient safety grounds, owing to a difficulty in recruiting GPs at that time. A consultation is now under way, and it is for my right hon. Friend's constituents to make their case as part of that consultation.

The people affected by these changes need to be involved in the decision; that is what the consultation will seek to achieve. Our starting point for discussing service change is that there will be no changes to the services that people currently receive without proper public consultation. I therefore urge my right hon. Friend and his constituents to make their voices heard as part of that consultation in the usual way.

Question put and agreed to.

7.27 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 13 March 2018

[MR ADRIAN BAILEY *in the Chair*]

Diplomatic Service and Resources

9.30 am

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Diplomatic Service and resources.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I am grateful for and slightly awed by the array of right hon. and hon. Members present who have much more experience of this issue than I have. It is an extremely important one and I am very grateful to the Minister for being here. I hope that he will be able to address some of the points that I and others raise.

We exist at a time of the greatest turbulence and change. With Brexit, we have the resulting need to engage as never before with countries around the world. We see, never more than this week, challenges to the rules-based order. We see the rise of new powers, such as China, which is stamping its mark on the world politically, economically and militarily on a scale unimagined a few years ago. We also see the influence of political disrupters across western democracies. This is the time to challenge policy of several Governments and many decades that has led to a decline in our commitment to foreign engagement.

It has been a real privilege for me to travel as a Minister, as a trade envoy, as the leader of the UK's delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and in other capacities, and to see at first hand the astounding professionalism of our diplomatic staff around the world. Numbers are not everything. Having a fluent Arabic-speaking middle east expert as our ambassador to Iraq with the President's personal mobile number on his speed dial is of incalculable value. However, we have reached a critical moment in our ability to promote our interests abroad.

I had a conversation yesterday with Lord Waldegrave. He has spent time as a Minister in both the Treasury and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and he said, in a way that was somewhat light-hearted but nevertheless heartfelt, that in his impression there has been a multi-decadal battle between the Treasury and the FCO, which the Treasury has now won—a battle between the two great Departments of state that vie for influence with No. 10 and across Government. Two decades ago, it was deemed the right thing to hive off international development to a new Department. Part of that perhaps was a good thing at the time, but I have always felt that part of it was distaste for the concept that aid and influence could ever go together. For me, that has never been a problem: of course they can, and they should.

In some areas, the European Union was seen by some as the deliverer of our overseas influence.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): My right hon. Friend talks about the Treasury and other Departments. Obviously, the Department for International Development has had successive incredible spending rounds. Does he agree that the military attaché network,

which he and I have seen in places such as Africa, does a huge amount of good in terms of influence and building those relationships? Surely, in countries that are basically aid-dependent, DFID should be paying for that network.

Richard Benyon: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Later in my speech, I will talk about defence attachés and how we can copy the way that other countries do that better.

I have travelled to parts of the world where the Union flag might exist in the corner of an island state's flag but there is no Union flag flying over anything that could resemble a high commission, embassy or diplomatic mission. All aid to the Pacific region was delivered through the EU; I could not find one sign of recognition of the sacrifice that the UK taxpayer made to provide that much-needed aid—it all had the EU mark on it.

Well before 2010, embassies were being sold off. They were bricks and mortar whose value in terms of influence vastly outweighed their real estate value. Our missions abroad were reduced and our diplomatic service language school was closed. After 2010, some good things started to happen: the language school was reopened; embassies that had been closed were reopened. But what that really meant was that our diplomatic missions abroad were marginally broader, but shallower too. I was in Mali just as we reopened our embassy there. An excellent ambassador arrived and she took over with a staff of one locally recruited driver. According to the FCO figures, there are now three FCO personnel there.

This year, the Government will spend £2.15 billion on the winter fuel allowance—a welfare element that we all support—but that is more than the £2 billion we spend on our foreign affairs budget. Let us compare how France and Germany—two similar-sized countries, both in the EU—manage their diplomatic services abroad. France spends £4.2 billion on its diplomatic service—more than twice what we spend on ours. As a country, it has a clear view that in order to maintain its P5 status it will stay true to its spheres of influence. Our 30-year bout of post-colonial guilt syndrome in this country, which may well have abated now, never seemed to have a parallel in the French psyche. France maintains a very clear involvement and commitment to countries in north and west Africa in particular, but also across the middle east. It maintains a much more permanent presence in areas where it has a history of influence.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I am listening closely to what my right hon. Friend is saying. I believe that even some former French colonies are represented in the French Parliament, unlike here. At the end of the day, it is worth remembering that France has Francophonie; they look with envy at the Commonwealth, which is an organisation that they are unable to replicate. They rather wonder at it. I very much hope that my right hon. Friend will mention the Commonwealth in his speech.

Richard Benyon: I certainly will. Our commitment to the Commonwealth is at the forefront of our minds, with the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting about to take place. There are some very important Commonwealth countries that we owe more attention to. We must see this as a very important part of our foreign engagement in the years ahead. There has not been a more important time for the Commonwealth to

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exist, and for the Government to have a clear strategy of supporting it both economically and using all the soft-power influence we can, to ensure that this wide variety of economies and countries united by a set of values can be a key part of our foreign engagement in future.

I do not know how many diplomats France deploys in the Central African Republic, Niger or Senegal, but I bet it is many more than the two we have in Lusaka, the two we have in Gaborone or even the seven we have in Harare, according to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office annual report and accounts.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): My right hon. Friend mentions Zimbabwe; I was there recently and I noticed that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and DFID sit together in the same building. It is clear, when looking at it, what a remarkable success that is; they each act as a force multiplier to each other. It would be just as well if that was replicated the whole way across the foreign service.

Richard Benyon: I could not agree more. I saw a similar one-post operation in Addis Ababa, where our excellent ambassador, Susanna Moorehead, has forged a team that includes representatives of DFID, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Trade into one cohesive force. They certainly punch above their weight, and they are able to influence things as a result. I particularly note what my right hon. Friend said about Zimbabwe. There has never been a more important time for us to engage there. If we allow ourselves to be optimistic, there is the chance that Zimbabwe will emerge from the tragedy of recent decades.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Will my right hon. Friend also consider the influence that small missions can have? For example, in the past seven years we have opened embassies in Abidjan, Juba and Antananarivo. Although they have only one FCO-employed official and some locally employed staff, they deliver huge influence and are very warmly received by the host country. Surely we should do that more in Africa and the Pacific.

Richard Benyon: I could not agree more. As I said, numbers are not everything. Diplomats' ability to influence and to project Britain's engagement abroad is of course down to the skill of individuals and their capacity to get that message across. The number of countries where we do not have anyone is missing from the list of personnel in the FCO's annual report and accounts. We need to look at that.

I said that I would come back to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) made about defence attachés. France deploys a cadre of highly professional defence attachés who are proficient in local languages and who develop their careers and are rewarded as resident experts in countries across the middle east and north and west Africa. They often attend local staff colleges. Their career involvement in the regions to which they are posted is considered a virtue. I, too, have met some outstanding defence attachés. I know that there has been a change in recent years to try to develop longer-term

postings, and that we send people to staff colleges, for example. However, the French colonel I met who had a direct way in to the Minister of Defence in a particular country had that because he had been in that region for 15 years, was fluent in the language and had embedded himself in the politics of the region.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Developing my right hon. Friend's theme, I too have experience of the outstanding work that defence attachés do in our NATO partner countries, such as the United States, and way beyond, in the Gulf and the far east. Their role extends further than military-to-military relationships; they also play a vital role in assisting commercial exploitation of defence capability and supporting British companies that seek to secure defence and security orders overseas.

Richard Benyon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The role of defence attachés in our defence manufacturing capability and our ability to market that important part of our economy is so important. I entirely support what he says.

France also has a truly impressive integrated soft power strategy. The opening of the Louvre museum in Abu Dhabi is a key indicator of that. Off the back of Government investment—not private investment, but cultural investment by the Government—flows influence that directly benefits France's Exchequer. It is hard to compare like with like, but it is possible to argue that Germany spends about three times what we spend on its posts abroad. Even if we strip it down, it spends at least £4.6 billion, which is well over twice what we spend. We spend way more than Germany on development aid in Zambia, yet we employ about 11 people to deliver it, while Germany has around 150 people delivering its aid projects there. That is because we deliver our aid through a variety of organisations, including non-governmental organisations and international institutions such as the World Bank, whereas Germany uses a well-developed cadre of in-country experts in education, health, agriculture and other disciplines to implement its projects. At the end of the day, that means that German taxpayers get a better deal because German business is intrinsically linked to the soft power investment that its Government makes.

I am here not just to whinge, but to suggest a way forward. I want the Minister to reassure us. If he cannot, I want him to take on board the genuine concerns of people who have seen how our country operates abroad and believe that, impressive though that is, we need a dynamic shift in our ability to engage in the dangerous and highly competitive world in which we find ourselves. Can he assure us that every penny of official development assistance that can be used to develop a growing number of highly professional diplomats, defence attachés and other personnel is being used to maintain us as a relevant power in the coming decades? Can he convince me that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office understands Africa? Does he understand my concern, as someone who has travelled widely in Africa and was for some years our trade envoy in Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique, that our position as a favoured partner may be under threat?

In a few years' time, a quarter of the world's population will live in Africa. It is a continent of huge natural resources and has massive potential as a partner in

trade and so many other areas, but it feels like Britain risks being left behind. China's investments abroad are not altruistic. In many ways, what it is doing is good—I have seen new roads, electricity generation projects and vast business parks, including in Ethiopia, that are changing people's lives and providing wealth and opportunities for female empowerment, among other things—but it has a massive benefit to China, too. There can be a similar benefit to Britain if we play to our strengths on a continent where we are still admired and where such things as our language and our time zone are distinct advantages.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Select Committee on Foreign Affairs was in Paris the other day. We had an interesting discussion about how Britain and France can co-operate in Africa. There are countries where the former colonial power is not well regarded. We have been able to play an important role in places where France is the former colonial power—Mali, the Sahel and so on—in return for exactly the same co-operation where we are the former colonial power. Now that we are leaving the European Union, I wonder whether we need to be wise about how we manage our relations with our European allies.

Richard Benyon: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. Our trade envoy, Lord Risby, is doing great work in countries such as Algeria in promoting what we do. I have not heard this from him, but I imagine that he is able to have conversations that the French perhaps find it harder to have. On defence engagement, we are using the Lancaster House agreement to our benefit. We are assisting the French forces in Mali with lift—with helicopters and things like that. That partnership in the fight against terrorism—against organisations such as Boko Haram and al-Shabaab—delivers influence and benefit in a variety of ways.

My final point is that Ministers in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office require political intelligence.

Chris Bryant: Uh-oh. [*Laughter.*]

Richard Benyon: Perhaps I should have worded that better. They require intelligence about what is going on politically in those countries. They need to know who is on the rise in different parties, who the new influences are and who could be the next generation of leaders. Our diplomats provide that intelligence superbly, but Parliament should hold the Executive to account to ensure that we have enough of them and that we have them in the right places.

I argue that there should be a new strategy, even if we were not leaving the EU. However, Brexit brings a new urgency to our deliberations. It is not too late to see a paradigm shift in our strategy, but influence is hard won and easily lost. We need to understand that with influence comes jobs at home and stability abroad. That is something that even the Treasury should understand.

9.50 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) on putting the case forward so ably, as he always does when bringing issues to the House for consideration.

Many in the Chamber are Brexiteers; some are not, but we are moving forward none the less. It is well known that I am a Brexiteer for many reasons, including so that we can be a sovereign democratic nation, decide what the rule of law is and how it should be interpreted, and set our own foreign and domestic policies to sow into our economy, instead of upholding those of other countries who have nothing but contempt for us and everything we stand for. When I was looking into the debate and getting background information about it, that is what my heart was saying, but that was not enough. We needed to know that we could survive outside Europe—the figures needed to be found and the numbers crunched. They determined that, yes, we could survive, but more than that, we could thrive as a nation in our own right once again by becoming the global Britain that we have heard so much about. How do we do that? That is why this debate is important.

The first step is to enhance the links we have now, taking the complete focus off Europe while firming up our trade partnerships there, and exploring other relationships outside that. We need the diplomatic service and resources to make that happen.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Is it not the case that if industries such as food and drink, which has a deep presence in my constituency, are to make the most of post-Brexit export market opportunities, we need more than ever a well-resourced diplomatic service with a genuinely global reach?

Jim Shannon: I agree. Each of us in the Chamber can speak for our own food and drink sectors. I am pleased to have Portavogie prawns and Comber potatoes in my constituency, both of which are names in their own right across Europe, and we want to see them across the whole of the world. We will build on that trade to make that happen. A number of new gin distilleries are also starting up: two have done so in my constituency in the last year and a half, and the hon. Lady probably has those as well. The sector is growing, and we want to ensure that that continues.

Chris Bryant: But according to the Prime Minister yesterday, the biggest threat we face at the moment relates to Russia. We have been proud that, over the past few years, we have managed to go to European Council meetings and get the rest of the European Union to sign up to international sanctions against Russia. At the moment, the Prime Minister is speaking to Macron and, no doubt, Merkel and other leaders around Europe to try to get the whole of Europe signed up to a common position. That will be vital to us. It will be much more difficult for us to achieve that when in future we will not get to sit at the table when common security and defence policy is agreed. How does the hon. Gentleman think that will happen?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his “but.” It is always good to have his input. Let us be honest: we all see the common threat, which at this time is Russia, as the Prime Minister told us yesterday in the Chamber. It is across the fronts of all the papers and front-page news on the media today. Already, France, Germany and other European partners recognise the common threat of Russia. I am confident, as I hope he

[*Jim Shannon*]

is, about how we can espy the common enemy, understand where the focus has to be and then move forward accordingly.

An oft-cited statistic on trade with the Commonwealth bears repeating: in 2015, UK exports of goods and services to the Commonwealth were worth some £47.4 billion, while imports were worth £45.5 billion. The right hon. Member for Newbury referred to the Commonwealth, and we cannot forget about it. It is important for us to have it in place.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that in all walks of life and every organisation, there comes a time when reinvigoration and renewals is needed, and the diplomatic service is no different from any other? If we are moving away from the European Union, we need to be at the top of our game and, as has been mentioned, have proper staff in place to take us forward into the next century.

Jim Shannon: Yes, we do need to invigorate. It is like a marriage: every now and again we need to invigorate it. It is important that we do so at this level, and that we do it well.

Those statistics on Commonwealth exports and imports give us a good idea. It is clear that great work is being done, but there is massive potential for more to be done. We are looking at how we can advance that. The UK's trade is heavily focused on a small number of the 51 Commonwealth countries: in 2015, Australia, Canada, India, Singapore and South Africa accounted for 70% of UK exports to Commonwealth countries and 65% of imports from the Commonwealth. Those are massive figures, but we can build on that and do better.

How are trade links to be developed to deliver their full potential? A big key is through our Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Minister and the embassies. I know the Minister is committed to that at every level. Our teams in the embassies do a phenomenal job. I spoke recently in a debate highlighting the great work that the FCO did in bringing the body of one of my constituents home, and praise goes to the FCO for the marvellous work it does, but that case showed clearly that it could help so quickly and bring so much relief and peace to a grieving family because there was someone on the ground to sort it out. That was because we already have phenomenal staff in the embassies doing great work.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): My hon. Friend has given one example from his constituency, but does he agree that we need to see more of what the diplomatic service does in many countries, which is work in alerting the United Kingdom Government of international security consequences and relief that can be offered in terms of Africa as well as the business of creating trade, which benefits both the recipient country and ourselves?

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is right. The work that the embassies do cannot and does not happen when we are busy bringing people from our embassies into our EU embassies. We cannot afford to continue to have our focus split in such a way by robbing Peter to pay Paul. It is necessary to have trading partnerships in place

in Europe, but it is also necessary to have representation globally, outside of Europe. That is where our focus should and must be as of now, and particularly as of 31 March 2019.

The FCO feels the same way, which is why it has sold off part of the family silver in the form of the Bangkok embassy. I understand that prime real estate can be sold to help make the changes needed to evolve the FCO while maintaining a presence, but my fear has been succinctly put in the words of a *Guardian* article, which cited a former Minister saying:

“Yes, we can sell the family silver for a bit and, yes, we punch above our weight, but unless we are careful, we are about to step into the ring with people way above our weight and without any gloves.”

We must be careful about what we do—that is the gist of that article. I want to take this opportunity to impress upon Government and the Minister how essential it is that funding is given to allow the FCO to do what we ask it to do: to establish a presence, build on that presence, and ensure that the links and support on the ground are there. The right hon. Member for Newbury put down a clear marker for that in his introduction.

To take this matter to a constituency level—everything relates to back home in our constituencies—I am currently working with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs team and the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to attempt to circumnavigate the mounds of red tape that exist between differing nations such as China and ourselves.

A business in my constituency is ready with a product and raring to go in China, yet it is being held up by the wording on a veterinary certificate. It is immensely frustrating to see how people can introduce words to become obstacles to moving forward. We have been negotiating and working on this—I praise that Minister, who is going through the same frustration—and it is clear that in such situations our Departments need the help and guidance of the FCO.

In achieving for constituents and businesses in the UK, we achieve for ourselves. When a business in Ards thrives and takes on more staff, my local economy thrives. Because of the nature of tax, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs also thrives, and therefore on the national level we thrive as well. To do that we need staff on the ground in those countries to help departments, and we cannot have them all sent off to shore up embassies in Europe. We must send those staff where we will need them in the future. We must be able to work both inside and outside Europe, and to do that we must have the finance and staff in place. That is where we are at present.

The point of this motion, at least for me, and most certainly my take on it, is that for us to succeed globally we must be present and effective globally. That will not happen if we scale back globally to focus on Europe alone. Hopefully the Minister will confirm that we are branching out and developing our embassies across the world, taking up global opportunities and doing all the things referred to by my hon. Friend and colleague the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell). We should be helping people in other countries, but also trying to advance our export and import trade.

I understand that the Department is in a difficult position, but we need to play the long game, which I do not believe means pulling back in other nations. We must

keep the gloves on and be prepared to fight for our global position, and not allow Europe to seem to be the be-all and end-all of our future aims and strategies—that is why we voted to leave the European Union. Let me be clear: I must not be misunderstood as saying that we should pull out of Europe—certainly not. Trade with Europe is important for our future, but so is global trade and we must find a way of doing both and doing them well. That will mean recruiting more and spending more now, as well as in the long term, and receiving more for all our benefits. I implore the Minister: sell no more family silver, and instead focus on polishing what we have and putting it to the best use possible.

10.1 am

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) on his excellent speech in opening this important and serious debate. I will not respond to what the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—he is also my friend—said, other than to remind him of famous lines written in worse days: “To hell with the future and God bless the past, and may God in his mercy look down on Belfast.” I think that to characterise the situation with the European Union in the way that he did is not sensible or helpful to his constituents.

I will commence my remarks by paying tribute to the Foreign Office and all those who work there. What it now achieves on its very, very limited budget is exceptional. Generally speaking, the standard of our people and our representation abroad is astonishingly good, as my right hon. Friend made clear. I hope the House will acknowledge that, and thank those staff and praise them for their efforts.

I strongly endorse the words of my hon. Friends the Members for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) and for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) about military attachés. When I was Minister of State for the Armed Forces I used to interview every military attaché personally, because I believe it is a significant and important position within an embassy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow said, military attachés are part of the golden currency and their role is far wider than just the military. In places such as the Gulf, Saudi Arabia, and particularly in the middle east where the golden currency is relationships, those military attachés play a vital role that should be seen—as indeed it is—not as a sort of job at the end of a distinguished career, but as a job for someone very much on the way up. It is an important part of our diplomatic effort.

It seems yet another act of self-inflicted British mutilation that, at a time when the risks and problems abroad are ever increasing, and when through a very poor decision this country has decided to leave the European Union and make our way in a complex and difficult world alone, we should so ill resource our Foreign Office. We must put that right immediately. Contrary to what most of the tabloid press believe, this country is not a superpower, and it is inevitable that our influence—already sadly but quite clearly on the wane—will further decrease as the realities of the folly of our exit from the European Union become clear. A middle-ranking power, for that is what we are, must work very hard indeed to protect and further its interests. It must burnish and sustain its alliances, networks and friendships to keep them in good working order, and above all in good repair, ready

for the day when we need them for the big stuff. Such a day is today, and the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister, and all those concerned will be doing all they can to bring our allies and friends alongside us in the very difficult task that we have over the next 24 hours when dealing with the Russians.

Sir Hugo Swire: To continue that theme, if we are to have any credibility, and ultimately if we are to maintain our seat as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, is it not ever more important to stamp what the United Kingdom stands for around the world, and redouble our commitment to NATO and other organisations?

Sir Nicholas Soames: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend. He was a distinguished and successful Foreign Office Minister, and he has seen all these things in action. He is completely right: we will have to redouble all our efforts, call in all our chips, and work very hard to retain our influence and position on the world stage. That is an incontestable fact.

Chris Bryant: Some people have suggested in recent months that after Brexit, instead of spending so much time on Brussels, we should spend more time on other European capitals. My feeling is exactly the opposite: to secure the foreign policy and security outcomes we want, will we not have to double our efforts in Brussels to ensure that we win arguments?

Sir Nicholas Soames: I agree, and I would say further that we will have to ride every single horse in the park, not just the European horse. We no longer have a diplomatic network in the way that we used to, because our diplomatic network has been subordinated, in a perfectly sensible way, to working within the European Union. We will have to revitalise that, and indeed there is now a great rush to hire people or move them around, to ensure that the embassies are properly equipped. My father was for a time the British Ambassador in Paris. I was in the Army at that time, and I look back on those days, before we were members of the European Union, at the sheer scale of British diplomatic efforts to achieve what we set out to achieve, which was truly remarkable. We will have to replicate that right across Europe in order to retain our position.

Chris Bryant *rose—*

Sir Nicholas Soames: I will continue if I may.

These relationships with allies, friends and networks do not just drop into our lap; they require continuous and ceaseless effort, and the most serious diplomatic work. Take the example of the last few months. With our allies we continue to be engaged in an active diplomatic and other campaign to counter Islamist extremism. We have also once again entered an era of deterrence in the face of threatening rhetoric and aggressive behaviour from Russia. While military deterrence must be properly integrated with political, economic, diplomatic and other hybrid deterrence measures, credible conventional military capability remains a vital part of a strategy designed to keep the peace. It also ranks, *pari passu*, with the diplomatic effort required to ensure the same thing. In an environment of uncertainty, it is essential that we stand with all our diplomatic, military and other assets,

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ready to reassure, and if necessary defend, our allies in a manner that will force any potential opponents to think twice. As I have said, that requires not just military assets, but most especially our diplomatic reach across the world.

Jim Shannon: On the news this morning one suggestion made by one of the experts in response to Russia's actions was that we should withdraw from the World cup in Russia, and instead hold it here in England. Does the right hon. Gentleman feel that that would be an impressive way of putting pressure on Russia to bring about change? It is perhaps a diplomatic way—well, it might be an undiplomatic way of doing it, but it is an important way.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I do not think that it is nearly serious enough for the kind of steps that the Government will need to take against Russia. Just to say a lot of dignitaries will not be sent to the World cup is nowhere near good enough. It is a pathetic response. We will need to do much better and be much tougher, so that it is understood across the full spectrum that the behaviour in question is something up with which we will not put.

It is not just a question of money, although that is vital, of course. It is also a question—and my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury made the point extremely well—of how we marry our hard power, which is sadly considerably diminished, to our exceptional soft power, and ensure that they both work closely together in achieving our diplomatic objectives. It is frankly far too casual and complacent a habit, into which this country falls at the slightest opportunity, to assume that that happens by magic. It is my view that our exceptional and truly remarkable soft power is not well or effectively co-ordinated with our other diplomacy. Indeed, there is a view in the Foreign Office that it should be left well alone to get on with it by itself. The issues of security, development, energy, climate change and all the rest of it have to be worked through in tandem with soft power, as well as with diplomacy, the military, development aid experts and everyone else involved, so that they work together and not in competition.

I want to return to a point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury has already enlarged on, and mention how extraordinarily impressed I was by our diplomatic mission in Harare—our excellent ambassador and her wonderful staff—and by the DFID staff, who are excellent. They are working together and acting as a force multiplier for the United Kingdom and for our objectives in Zimbabwe. We could not have been so successful in Zimbabwe with that extraordinary aid programme, which is brilliant, without everyone working together. It is a model for the rest of the diplomatic service. There are still places, in the lands of the ungodly, where that does not happen. It is unthinkable, to my mind, that the Foreign Secretary does not issue a fatwa to the effect that it will happen everywhere—and that right soon. It is a ridiculous waste of money and assets for the two to be accommodated separately. They should be accommodated together and work together for British interests.

I cannot believe that my right hon. Friend the Minister believes that it is sensible even to consider closing more diplomatic posts. Indeed, we must now be pretty much

at the bare minimum of our representation. We need adequately to staff the smaller posts, so that we do not just have an ambassador and a locally engaged driver. It is all very well having locally engaged staff. They are marvellous and do a good job, and they are very loyal; but they are not, at the end of the day, Brits. We are after promoting our British way of life and our values. I again endorse the point that we must return constantly to making sure that people understand the values of this country as we make our sad way from the European Union. It is right that we re-establish our values as they are. That requires a good, decent diplomatic story.

I also reaffirm my unstinting support and admiration for the BBC World Service and congratulate everyone who works in that extraordinary organisation on the excellent job they do for this country. It would be a foolish short-term measure to reduce in any way the financial support to the BBC World Service, and I look to the Government to give me an assurance that that will not be the case. I endorse the views of the provost, or rather Lord Waldegrave—he is the provost of the school that my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury went to—about the winner of the battle between the two great Departments of state, with respect to the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence. I always used to say—I hasten to say it was as a joke, because I actually got a letter from the Foreign Office stating that it did not work for the Russians—that the Treasury works for the Russians, given how successfully it has undermined our military effort. I wholly support my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence in the energetic and earnest campaign that he is rightly waging to increase our military spending to about 2.5% as a bare minimum.

Sir Henry Bellingham: My right hon. Friend has mentioned the BBC World Service. Does he agree that in many of the countries that he mentioned, where we need to have one family in one location, the role of the British Council is also extremely important and is a crucial way of building up our soft power, as is the role of the BBC World Service?

Sir Nicholas Soames: My hon. Friend has always been known for his natural exuberance. If he would pause for a second, he would hear the magisterial exposition that I am about to give of the British Council. Another balls-up by Bellingham.

To pre-empt my hon. Friend's over-excitement, we have a priceless asset in the British Council. I again urge the Foreign Office to accept its vital importance. It is important that it should work extremely closely with the Foreign Office and in the general promotion of the British aim, and that the Government should continue to fund it, recognising the exceptional results that it achieves for Great Britain. I try always, when I am lucky enough to travel abroad, to call on the British Council. I cannot tell you, Mr Bailey, how much I admire the remarkable work done, in place after place where I have been, by the people who work for the British Council. It is extraordinary. They build profound relationships with people—for example, through the learning of English, which hopefully equips people to come here and study. It is part of a greater British effort, and important for that.

There is a compelling—indeed, unassailable—case for Britain to retain and develop its active diplomacy, which means it must be better resourced, and to provide

the money needed to do the job properly. We are all struggling to retain a rules-based world, which is clearly in our best interests and which we have always promoted. We have, over the years, been its architect and great supporter, with our American allies and others. It is today a concept under considerable threat. Our country is truly at a crossroads. Our global influence is already coming under considerable pressure and it is essential for the further success, safety and security of this realm that our diplomacy is properly resourced, so that it can do the very good job that it currently does on a shoestring.

10.17 am

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Thank you, Mr Bailey, for getting round to this knight, as Sir Lancelot may have said to Guinevere. I am delighted to join in this important debate this morning. I hope that it will not be the last we shall have on the subject.

I do not seek to replicate much of what my right hon. and hon. Friends have said. I just want to pick up on one or two issues, the first of which is our physical global imprint—our estate. I hope to go from here later to a lunch to congratulate James Stourton and Luke White, who have produced a magnificent book called “British Embassies: Their Diplomatic and Architectural History”. It is an extraordinarily good book on Britain’s overseas estate. Looking through it, it is possible to have one of two reactions—to giggle in bemused embarrassment at the awful post-colonial life that our embassies represent, or feel rather proud that we possess some of the finest properties, many of which, incidentally, were gifted to us by the then Heads of State of the host countries. That is something that other countries look on with envy.

In my four and a half years at the Foreign Office, I was pleased to open some rather small embassies that had been closed, in Asunción and in El Salvador, and a consulate in Recife, and so on. It was always a source of pride to be reopening embassies, however small, rather than going around closing them. I cannot think of a single example, in retrospect, about which we can say, “Gosh, weren’t we clever to sell X embassy: we are in much better accommodation now”—Madrid being one of the great disasters. I was rather involved in the Bangkok embassy site; the rationale for the sale was that it was inappropriately located and no longer fit for purpose, although, needless to say, we had just spent some huge amount of money on accommodation on that site. I note with horror what I have picked up on my various visits—that the Chancellery building in Paris, which will be well known to my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), whose bedroom no doubt overlooked it for many happy years, is possibly going to be sold. What a ridiculous message it would send to Paris, at the heart of Europe, as we exit the European Union, to sell our Chancellery building on the rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré.

My right hon. Friend the Minister does an excellent job in the Foreign Office now. I do not know whether he sits on the body I sat on—the Foreign Office board, where many of these things are discussed. It strikes me, in my experience, that these things are never brought to the attention of Ministers. Perhaps they are brought to the Foreign Secretary, but on the whole they are decided by the permanent under-secretary and others—the mandarins within the Foreign Office. There is absolutely

no doubt, to my way of thinking, that these are Treasury-led decisions. It is about saving money, not about looking at our global footprint and where we want to be represented.

In future, whenever there is any discussion, there is an oversight role here for the Foreign Affairs Committee, on which many hon. Members sit, to have a view on any proposed changes to the diplomatic estate globally, and not at the eleventh hour, when the decisions have effectively already been taken. I would like to see that change, and I would welcome the Minister’s view on that.

Chris Bryant *rose—*

Richard Benyon *rose—*

Sir Hugo Swire: I will take the hon. Gentleman’s intervention first, and then that of my right hon. Friend.

Chris Bryant: The Foreign Affairs Committee intends to do exactly as the right hon. Gentleman suggests. If I can correct one thing, I do not think the Madrid decision was made on a Treasury basis. The old building was difficult to maintain and was listed under Spanish law and all the rest of it, but we did move to the wrong place. I opened it, as it happened—the highest embassy we have in the world, I think, because it is in the highest capital in Europe and on the 75th floor, or whatever. It is virtually inaccessible to lots of people and it was a terrible mistake for us to move there. My biggest concern—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be short and not speeches. I want to bring the Front-Bench spokespersons in at 10.30, so would everybody bear that in mind?

Sir Hugo Swire: I will take a brief intervention from my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury.

Richard Benyon: I was in Panama just after we sold one of the few nice buildings in Panama City, on the main corniche, and moved the embassy residence to the suburbs. The ambassador said to me, almost with tears in his eyes, that he could have made a business case for the use of that building that would have allowed us to continue there. Does my right hon. Friend agree that such decisions are often taken with a short-term perspective, which results in a failure to understand not only the long-term business case, but the influence case?

Sir Hugo Swire: My right hon. Friend is clearly right. I see that on 21 February, in a topical question, I asked that there be a moratorium on any asset disposals until such a review is complete. That question was answered with tremendous agreement by the Foreign Secretary. Let us have a moratorium until we decide what our global footprint will be, and let us have no more selling off of properties until the Foreign Affairs Committee has some formal oversight role.

Another thing I campaigned for, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex touched on briefly in describing his experiences in Zimbabwe, is what I called “one HMG”. I should be interested to hear an update from the Minister on that. Over the years, many different Government Departments have crept into some of these places and have other organisations in many capitals around the world; they include the Scotland

[Sir Hugo Swire]

Office, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department of Energy and Climate Change. Often, the ambassador does not have much control over some of these other organisations.

In some countries—I think Nepal was one—the head of the Department for International Development was a much more senior figure than our ambassador and would not kowtow to them. It is my view that, very simply, the individual who represents the British Government abroad is the ambassador, and everybody should work for the ambassador. There should be no discrepancy in employment, accommodation and so on, and where possible, all those other agencies should be brought under the British embassy or the British high commission and co-located on that estate.

That leads me to my next point: we are still shadow-boxing about the independence of DFID. Increasingly, as a lot of the Foreign Office is funded by overseas development money, that skews things and the lines are getting blurred. I wish at some point someone would have the bravery to say that DFID belongs back with the mother ship. We could have huge economies and savings, and greater alignment of British views and values overseas, by bringing it back to the mother ship. To anyone who says, “We can’t do that; all the non-governmental organisations will get too upset,” I say that I do not think the NGOs are in any position to do anything at the moment—at least some of them—and the stock rejoinder to them is, “Look, we stand by our pledge of 0.07% of GDP. That’s our answer. How we actually apply that is up to the Government, not the NGOs.”

We are about to see a major change to the European External Action Service, the force under Federica Mogherini. I always thought it to be pretty hit and miss around the world; it seemed to me very often that the head of the EEAS was always going off to the British embassy to find out the latest intelligence, but we paid a lot of money to the EEAS and a lot of our best people were employed there, on better terms than our own people locally. That is something we want to withdraw; I would be interested to hear the Minister’s views on how many British people who currently work for the EEAS will be pulled back into the FCO and where they will be deployed.

Overall, it seems to me that a major piece of work needs to be done—a major realignment of what the UK is seeking to do abroad. That involves the World Service, the British Council and different Departments of State; it involves redefining what we mean by soft power as well as ensuring that that soft power is backed up by a sufficient military capability. It is pointless to have soft power unless we have decent armed forces which, if necessary, can support that soft power. That is a fundamental piece of work that needs to be done, and I am not convinced that it is being done cross-departmentally or that it is being done by Ministers. I believe a Cabinet Sub-Committee should be set up without further ado to bring together all these competing demands on the Exchequer, to articulate what we expect from our superb diplomatic service—the envy of the world—to ensure that it is given the tools to do the job, and to better co-ordinate all the different parts of the state to that end.

10.27 am

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) on securing this debate. It is one that I seem to find myself in more and more often; I am sure the Minister is thinking, “Oh, not Docherty-Hughes again,” but I am also delighted to see the Minister in their place.

There seems to be a consistent narrative, when we debate the diplomatic service and resources, of concerns about investment from across the entire House. The right hon. Member was right that it is not just a numbers game. It is not just about numbers; they are not everything. Many of the right hon. and hon. Members here, who are far more learned and knowledgeable on these matters than I, will recognise that connectedness and relationships can also be critical in diplomacy and are equally important.

I have just returned from Washington DC with the Defence Committee, where I saw the work of the French diplomatic corps regarding some of the activities on Capitol Hill. Being a member of the European Union has not stopped them covering Capitol Hill like a rash and speaking vocally on behalf of the French Government. That is something that we have clearly forgotten about here in the UK. That is in the practical sense of their own diplomatic activity, but it is also about a recognition of how modern states engage; it is not just about the past, but about modern relationships under the international rule of law.

Clarity is also needed about how we strengthen our diplomatic networks without undermining further the institutional integrity and, importantly, the institutional memory of the FCO. While investment to create what I am led to believe will be 150 jobs to deal with the complexity of Brexit is welcome, we should have clarity that those new jobs do not undermine the capabilities of the FCO’s teams across Asia, Africa and even both of the Americas.

From my perspective, there are clear issues that the Government must consider in moving forward. First, we should recognise the relationships with our closest allies that support and enhance the rule of international law, which is critical if we are to move forward. Secondly, we should utilise diplomacy to enhance economic stability and discourage mercantilism, which undermines liberal democracy. Third—the Minister will no doubt know where I am going with this—we need to recognise the challenges that UK citizens face abroad if, for instance, they are arrested or held without charge. Many nations already have legislative frameworks under which their own diplomatic corps deal with this, but we do not. Consular support would offer clarity to our FCO teams, the families and Members. The Minister probably no doubt knows the example of my constituent, Jagtar Singh Johal, who continues to be held in India.

Fourthly, we should work with devolved Governments across the UK. For example, existing frameworks, such as the Scottish Government’s international framework, could be a useful tool in building those relationships we have in specific locations. We should recognise opportunities to strengthen the devolved Administrations’ offer, such as the work being undertaken by the Scottish Government with the Arctic Council and some of the Nordic states on the high north, where some would say we have key gaps, and also their hubs in Berlin and Paris. As I said

to the Prime Minister yesterday after her statement, we should also challenge some of our closest allies, such as Spain—a NATO member—which allows the refuelling and supply of the Russian fleet. Those are the kind of diplomacy implements that we should take forward.

We should also recognise that, with reduced resources, relationships are critical. In Washington DC, I noticed representatives of another European Union country—one with a population of 3 million—covering Capitol Hill in the most extraordinary way, but without a huge embassy to go with it: Ireland. Its diaspora is so interconnected that it could teach us a thing or two.

I have been consistent on how we should deal with Russia. When I turned on Radio Scotland this morning, I have to admit that I thought that the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) had suddenly become a Member for a Scottish constituency. However, I did not disagree with the majority of what they had to say. The challenges are clear, and they need to be rebuffed in a coherent and cohesive manner with our allies.

How are we supposed to cover the economic challenges that China poses while wanting to cover all the other bases? The right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) wanted us to ride all those horses. Given that we are leaving the European Union, how will we meet that challenge? I understand where they were coming from: it is about how we use our economic challenge to ride the horses such as China, the political, military, economic challenges of Russia and some of the most extraordinary challenges coming out of the United States.

There are great links to be had in the Commonwealth, but there are also huge challenges in how we diplomatically face down challenges to the international rule of law, such as human rights for women, Christians and Muslims—people of all faiths—and the LGBTI community. How do we do that during the complexity of leaving the European Union? Having voted to remain myself, and representing what I would say is a working-class constituency that voted to remain within the European Union, I, and I think the majority of Scottish constituency MPs, have yet to be convinced about the Government's approach to securing a more stable and peaceful future founded on sound diplomacy.

Finally, on an element of complexity in international law, will the Minister advise us how we will go forward in financing our diplomatic resources—people and those relationships—to make sure that we substantiate and add to the rule of international law and are not a detriment to it?

10.34 am

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is very nice to see you in the Chair, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) on securing this timely debate. He described the context in which we live at the moment as extremely turbulent, which is undoubtedly true, both in the short term, with our relations with Russia, and also with these big, strategic changes with the growth of China. I agree with him; I saw it 15 months ago in Lusophone Africa, where the Chinese are investing a great deal more than Portugal.

As the right hon. Gentleman said, everything is about context. In 1990, as a Treasury civil servant—we have heard about the divide between the Treasury and the

Foreign Office; I am afraid to say that I was a Treasury civil servant—I was sent to Prague. It was obviously a very turbulent time. The Berlin wall had fallen and the Czechoslovak Government were extremely worried that they would face the sort of energy crisis that Ukraine has suffered from, because the Russians were ramping up the prices for the oil and gas that the Czechoslovaks were wholly dependent on.

I was sent to work for a few months in the Czechoslovak Prime Minister's office. It was a very confused and chaotic time. Havel was in the Castle, but the rest of the Government contained communist members. The first thing I did was report to the head of mission. I went off, and I sat and waited, and the meeting was delayed and delayed. It took place an hour later. When I went in, he was incredibly stressed. I asked him what the matter was, and he said that his servants were on strike and he had been trying to sort it out.

I hope that the Foreign Office has moved on since 1990 in that respect, because it is extremely important that Foreign Office officials project Britain as we are now. I could not agree more with the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) on Britain's place in the world today. We are a middle-sized nation, not a superpower, and it is extremely important that we behave intelligently and appropriately. Fantasising about what we were and where we have been is distinctly unhelpful. He was also absolutely right that, in order to maximise our power and influence at the moment, we need to build relationships, whether with EU colleagues, in the United Nations or in NATO. We will never achieve anything except by collaborating with other countries.

Sir Nicholas Soames: The hon. Lady is making an impressive speech, but may I disagree with her on one tiny point? Although it is important that we do not think that we are what we were, we do have this absolutely wonderful architecture and a brilliant inheritance of vast experience all over the world, in good times and bad times. Our values and everything we stand for are built on rock-firm footings. It is now our job to see that that legacy is expressed in contemporary terms, which requires a much more aggressive approach.

Helen Goodman: I will come to the soft power aspects and the institutions that contribute to that in a moment. First, I want to look at the numbers and the reductions that the Foreign Office budget has had since 2010 and is projected to have.

Chris Bryant: I slightly disagree with the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames). I do not know whether my hon. Friend noticed, but Emmanuel Macron went to India the other day and said, notwithstanding our historic relationship with India, as part of the former empire and all the rest of it, that he intends France to be India's prime access point to the European Union in the future. We have to be very careful about not relying on the past.

Helen Goodman: If we leave the European Union, we obviously cannot be the prime access point to the European Union. That stands to reason.

I will come to the soft power assets in a moment, but I just want to say something about the numbers. The Foreign Office budget reduction is slightly unclear. Is it 16%, 30% or 40% over the 10-year period? Whatever it

[Helen Goodman]

is, it is quite a significant amount of resource. I realise that some of the Foreign Office budget has gone into the Department for International Trade and some into the Department for Exiting the European Union, but the smallest cut that one can glean from looking at the numbers is about 16%, which is none the less extremely large. It seems to me that it is difficult for the Government to project the global Britain role while at the same time reducing resources in the Foreign Office.

Turning to our soft power assets, we are all very proud of the World Service and pleased with the British Council, and we all think that the Commonwealth is a fantastic network. There is another soft power asset, which I think we should look at alongside those assets. I am talking about our universities and higher education. We have soft power assets in this country as well as overseas.

Sir Hugo Swire: Will the hon. Lady take this opportunity to applaud the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for the Chevening scholarship programme and the Commonwealth programme? These are hugely important ways of promoting the United Kingdom domestically to an international audience.

Helen Goodman: Yes, and of course the English language is the root of much of this.

However, I disagree with what was said previously in this debate about overseas aid. The Labour Government set up the Department for International Development as a separate Department in order that we could be absolutely clear that the aid budget had aid objectives—sustainable development objectives—and we have now agreed, on a cross-party basis, on the 0.7% target. We believe that aid has been much more effective and much better because it has not been jumbled up with other policy objectives. In my opinion, the foreign policy benefits from a good aid programme are greater than can be achieved when people try to go along to the Development Assistance Committee and fiddle with the rules, saying, “Oh, couldn’t we please put the hurricane money for the Caribbean into the overseas aid programme?” No. The reason why we get credibility and support from those countries that are receiving our aid is the very high quality of the aid, so I would certainly not wish to pull those two things together again.

One thing that is not very clear in the Foreign Office annual report and accounts is how the money is spent. In particular, it is not clear how the conflict, stability and security fund, which is the share of the budget going from the aid Department to the Foreign Office, is spent. I think the Government should be extremely cautious about merging those two.

I also think we need to put a question mark over the switch from Africa, Latin America and Asia to the European Union. Perhaps the Foreign Office simply does not have enough resource, in which case Foreign Office Ministers need to go back to their colleagues in the Treasury and make the case, but it seems to Opposition Members that if we want to develop our relationships across the globe, we cannot be cutting our resource in those other parts of the world. I submit that the switch of 50 people to the European Union will probably be quite a short-sighted change.

The question is really whether global Britain is a slogan or a policy. As the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs said, there is a risk that it is becoming a slogan rather than a policy. If Ministers need to bid for more money, so be it. We do not see holding to the current limit as necessarily a hard line. We should be investing in our relationships across the globe.

10.45 am

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) for securing this vital debate on an issue of national importance. I pay tribute to his valuable work on the Intelligence and Security Committee. I know from experience the time-consuming but absorbing nature of its activity, albeit that, by its nature, it is rather unsung and, in theory at least, low profile.

I thank everyone who contributed during the debate; there were some excellent contributions. I shall endeavour to answer all the questions, as I have a little more time than I had anticipated. There are one or two more technical aspects on which I will write to the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), if I am able to do so, subsequently.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury rightly talked about the need for a dramatic and dynamic shift of resource. He touched on our Africa strategy. As he will be aware, our right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set out, at her first G20 meeting in July 2017, a new long-term vision for our partnerships with Africa, centred on supporting African aspirations for economic growth, trade, job creation and investment. Ministers across Her Majesty’s Government have worked closely together to refresh our approach in order to deliver on that vision. We are clear—I reiterate the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury—that our substantial development spend in Africa needs to be directed more broadly towards the UK national interest, as well as supporting those in greatest need in Africa.

Let me touch on the point raised just now by the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland. I agree with her fundamentally, in that I think it is dangerous for us to look on aid as intermingled with other strands of British interest. We can take, for example, the deteriorating political situation in Cambodia at the moment. We have some important long-term aid programmes in Cambodia that deal with mine clearance and are designed to work for the most vulnerable in that country. The notion that we should hold the Cambodian Government of the day, however much we might disapprove of their work, to ransom in some form in that regard would be quite wrong. Indeed, I made it very clear in my meeting with the Cambodian ambassador only a few weeks ago that we would continue, on exactly the same terms, to fulfil our aid obligations.

However, I do believe that there is at least some mileage in the view that we need to look at this issue. I have sympathy with a number of my right hon. Friends, who talked in their contributions about the idea of DFID coming back into the Foreign Office. There is a sense in which there needs to be a broader focus. Particularly in the post-Brexit world that we will be living in, we need to focus all our energies in a one-Government situation.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury talked about official development assistance, which was also raised by the Opposition spokesman. It is right to say that the Foreign Office is and will continue to be a large ODA-spending Department. The Department closely complements DFID's efforts, and we are trying to deliver on the Government's aid strategy commitments through our own programmes—in particular, the cross-Whitehall conflict, stability and security fund and the prosperity fund, for which I now have responsibility in the Foreign Office. That also involves grants to external organisations, and our global remit means that we are designing those to deliver a breadth of programming in support of our national security strategy that other Departments simply do not have the resource to do. I believe that programmes of that sort will very evidently begin to add value by responding quickly to specific or niche requirements in volatile environments. I am talking about pursuing higher-risk programmes where political sensitivities require a different approach, but also exploring and testing options before scaling up and unlocking larger interventions by others.

It is recognised that some of the ODA and non-ODA programmes will have to be blended together, in order to secure some of the best outcomes in the future. That applies not just to Africa, but to Asia and the Pacific—an issue close to my heart and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire). I accept that an unintended consequence will be that some aspects of our annual report will be rendered more opaque.

In many ways it would be a pleasure to have a much broader debate, along the lines that my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) developed. I hope that we will be able to have further discussions both offline and on the Floor of the House in future. He is well aware that I have a significant amount of sympathy with much of what he said. We need to be realistic about where we are in the future. I will be honest: I gave considerable thought to whether I should be a Minister in this Government. I was, like him, passionately—on emotional and geopolitical grounds as much as anything else—keen that this country should stay in the European Union. Yes, in my heart of hearts, I do believe it was a mistake. However, we have to make it work. I think it is also important that people of my mind play their part within Government, rather than just beyond Government, not to frustrate that Brexit outcome, but to try and make it work as well as we can and to put that voice across.

Chris Bryant: I do not disagree with what the Minister has just said, but the key thing is how we ensure that we are able to secure the policy outcomes on defence, security and foreign affairs, in relation to places such as Russia, the middle east or Iran, after Brexit. I urge the Foreign Office to do a full review of our presence in Brussels itself, because it will need to become much more like a lobbying operation than it has ever been before.

Mark Field: I have a lot of sympathy with that view and I think there is little doubt that we will need to do that. I saw that when I attended the Foreign Affairs Council only last week, in the stead of the Foreign Secretary.

I will talk a bit about the British Council, because that was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex. I fully recognise the fantastic work

of the British Council and its soft power potential post-Brexit. I have seen that with my own eyes in virtually all my overseas visits in Asia, and indeed even last week when I was in Paris. Funding for the British Council has increased over the spending period. There are issues, as I think my right hon. Friend is aware, about the signing off of accounts. We need to get those accounts ready, not just to impress the Treasury, but because I want to be able to make the most aggressive case for the importance of that soft power, and the British Council's integral importance in that, when we leave the European Union, but that does require the British Council having its financial house in order. We are working closely with the Treasury to try to achieve that impact.

Sir Nicholas Soames *rose*—

Mark Field: If I may, I will make some progress, as I am now running out of time, having tried to address a number of the issues.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon made strong points about the issues around estates. We have discussed this in the past, but I have to say that I think all of us regret the idea that the embassy building in Bangkok had to be sold off. One rather hopes that having lost Bangkok, it will be the last of such sales. As he is well aware, a considerable amount of that money is being reinvested in improving our estates across the world. I have to say, I have not heard in any way the issue he raised about the Paris Chancellery. As for the EEAS people being sent back by the FCO, I will try and write to him in some detail on that.

I believe that a well-directed, properly funded diplomatic service is vital to delivering the United Kingdom's overseas objectives at such a crucial time. The world today is more complex, challenging and costly than at any point since the end of the cold war. At the same time, we are striving to deliver a positive, hopeful, optimistic and, I still hope, a successful exit from the EU, while simultaneously turning our vision of global Britain into reality by increasing further our already significant international reach and influence. It is no underestimate, however, to say today that the UK faces—I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex—its greatest diplomatic challenges in decades.

This Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that the diplomatic service receives the resources it needs to support a resilient and adaptable network, with sufficient capacity to respond decisively to fresh priorities and challenges. This includes exploiting the inevitable opportunities that will arise in a post-Brexit world.

We have some 274 posts in 169 different countries and territories. The FCO's current overseas network provides a crucial platform from which the 30 other Government Departments and agencies are able to operate. Our diplomats cultivate the deep and nuanced relationships that a number of right hon. and hon. Members have referred to, which provide critical political insight and access. This helps deliver all other aspects of Government policy around the globe. The diplomatic service must remain crucial to delivering that wide range of Government priority work, from counter-terrorism to cultural engagement, and from consular assistance to trade. I have a lot of sympathy with the direct point

[*Mark Field*]

that was made about the importance of our ambassador or high commissioner being the leading light, irrespective of all the other aspects of the one platform set-up.

Historically, it has been impossible to deliver this at comparatively little investment. As right hon. and hon. Members will be aware, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's budget this financial year is only £1.2 billion, which represents just 6% of the Government's expenditure on a major overseas Department. Once cross-Whitehall funds and non-discretionary spending, such as UN subscriptions, are removed, the remaining FCO budget is about £860 million. Delivering diplomacy at a relatively reduced slice of public expenditure in recent years has also been made partially possible through our membership of the European Union. Within the EU we have been able, hitherto, to amplify our voice in a range of international institutions. By leveraging the European Union we have been able to gain influence in countries where we have had a limited presence, such as francophone countries in west Africa. However, as our relationship beyond the European Union evolves, we must all accept that resourcing of the diplomatic service will also need to evolve to ensure that Britain's voice and influence is not diminished.

I have responsibility for the FCO's economic diplomacy and I recognise that sector-wide specialism in areas such as technology—whether FinTech or cybersecurity—international energy strategy, pharmaceuticals, and climate change and green finance will enable us to maximise our global impact. This will require not just bilateral co-operation, but a redoubling of our multilateral relationships, whether with the UN, the OECD or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, to name just a few.

Sir Nicholas Soames: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Field: If I may, I will make progress, because I am running out of time and I really do want to cover all the points.

Needless to say, when it comes to free trade agreements, the single most important deal that the UK shall strike in the years ahead is the one we are able to agree with the EU27. More investment in the diplomatic service is essential, so that it is able to deal with the increasingly complex challenges it faces, so I am pleased that this important task has already begun. Last September, the FCO received almost £6.5 million from the Treasury to help deliver its EU exit priority work. These funds were used to create over 150 new positions across London and the Europe network. I take on board the point raised by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) about the importance of Brussels in that whole set-up.

These diplomats are looking to work hard to deliver a new sanctions framework to transition the most crucial third-party agreements, to mitigate the risks of our EU exit for our overseas territories, for example, and to deepen bilateral relationships.

We recognise, however, that other countries are also investing heavily in their overseas networks, as my right hon. Friends have rightly observed. Germany is increasing its budget for its ministry for Foreign Affairs by a third, to some €5.2 billion over a three-year period. The French, the Dutch and the Turks are all investing substantially. Needless to say, in Asia, a part of the world for which I have responsibility, China, India and Japan are all doing likewise. If we are to maintain and increase our global outreach and influence, we need to ensure that the vision of a global Britain is more than just a mantra. I accept that for this, we must ensure that we provide the investment that is required. The FCO will evidently require reinforcements in Asia and the Pacific if the UK's global and security goals are to be properly achieved.

I have been heartened by the reaction of my ministerial colleagues across Government, as they have been alive to that need, but the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will continue to work closely with the Treasury to ensure that the diplomatic service is sufficiently resourced, not simply to deliver EU exit and global Britain, but to ensure that they are a success.

I will conclude, as I know my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury wants to speak briefly. I agree that if the UK is to continue to thrive and not simply survive, it is essential that we address the resource pressures of our diplomatic service. If we are to deal with the challenges and opportunities of the EU exit, I accept that we now need to consider where further investment is needed. I am pleased that we are debating this issue today. I hope that we will continue to debate it. I look forward to working closely with all of my colleagues here, who have this issue so passionately in their heart. Finally, the Government are committed to enabling Britain to have the diplomatic service it needs, as we work to realise our vision of a truly global Britain.

10.59 am

Richard Benyon: I am grateful to the Minister for coming here and giving such an honest and frank assessment. It was very impressive to hear. I hope he can convey a message back that many of us are looking, over the next few months, for a major setting out of a new strategy for these extraordinary times in which we live. That is going to require looking across the many issues that we have discussed. I am grateful for his reply to us today.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Pneumoconiosis: Support for Former Miners

11 am

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for former miners with pneumoconiosis.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I thank the Minister for being here to respond to the debate and colleagues for their attendance.

It is a privilege to have secured my first Westminster Hall debate on a subject of interest to many of my constituents and many in former coalmining communities across the UK. Mansfield has a proud coalmining history, which ended very recently—just a few years ago—when the nearby Thoresby colliery closed. For decades, the community was built around the industry, and we still feel many of its effects.

I applied for this debate because, although coalminers' pneumoconiosis is not a terribly widely known illness, it is prevalent within mining communities and should receive greater attention. I have been contacted by a number of constituents and unions about this issue, which I am keen to raise directly with Ministers. I am asking the Department for Work and Pensions to work with the Department of Health and Social Care to review the diagnostic tools that are used to assess miners for signs for pneumoconiosis.

Coalminers' pneumoconiosis is an occupational lung disease caused by the inhalation of dust from coalmines. It is often known as "black lung" and it causes thousands of death each year worldwide. Inhaled coal dust progressively builds up in the lungs over long periods, leading to inflammation of the lungs, fibrosis and even necrosis. The most common symptoms of pneumoconiosis are coughing and shortness of breath. The risk is generally higher when people have been exposed to mineral dust in high concentrations and if they have been exposed to coal dust for long periods.

Coughing and shortness of breath can, of course, be symptoms of a wide range of illnesses, which is partly why pneumoconiosis is often overlooked by health professionals and others. Even when a former miner presents to their GP with those symptoms, it is not always picked up straightaway. Most miners would recognise that a cough is inherent—part of the territory of working in those conditions—and many would not consider it a symptom of anything more than their career underground. Many therefore do not come forward early enough, and this is where the problem lies. We need to do more to encourage this conversation.

Many former miners who present with such symptoms are simply referred as out-patients to their local hospitals for standard chest X-rays. They will have had these X-rays regularly throughout their time in the industry and most will have been told that they have a clean bill of health on that basis. The trouble is that traditional two-dimensional X-ray films often do not show enough detail to diagnose pneumoconiosis, especially when the patient is in the early stages of the disease. The tell-tale sign of the disease is nodules in the lungs, which can be as small as 1 mm or 2 mm in diameter. When using X-rays for diagnosis, it is usually possible to pick up on pneumoconiosis only at a later stage, when large masses

of dense fibrosis have developed in the lungs. By that stage, there is usually a notable decrease in lung function—in effect, it is too late.

A successful diagnosis is also less likely because of the time that has passed since the pits closed. The doctor they see now, who examines the X-ray, is less likely to have specialist knowledge of the industry and related illnesses. They are also less likely to have seen this disease before, so are perhaps less likely to spot it.

For the best results and the quickest analysis, a CT scan is the most effective diagnostic tool. CT scans show the lungs in three dimensions, which provides far greater detail and allows for a more accurate diagnosis. For many of us, it is surprising to learn that there is not a regular screening programme in place for former coalminers to pick up cases of pneumoconiosis and other lung conditions. Many former miners received their last X-ray at work. When miners retire or are made redundant, their access to regular X-rays simply stops. Former miners then tend not to receive another until they present to their GP with symptoms such as breathing difficulties or a persistent cough. Many fear that they have cancer, and are given a CT scan only to find that it is in fact pneumoconiosis.

It is important to note that the latency period for pneumoconiosis is about 10 years, but can be as long as 15 to 20 years. The lack of regular screening once a miner leaves that environment and retires is clearly a problem. I am aware of several cases in my constituency of miners who received the all-clear for pneumoconiosis after getting old-fashioned X-rays at work, but were subsequently diagnosed with pneumoconiosis after CT scans revealed evidence of the disease.

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. I have personal experience of lung disease in the family. Both of my grandfathers were miners, and some of their lung issues did not come to the fore until at least a decade after they left the pit. I want to emphasise the importance of what he says: we need to ensure that there is support throughout the process and throughout people's lives.

Ben Bradley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is a prime example of why it is important that assessment is ongoing and people who used to work down the mines have access to diagnosis and treatment throughout the rest of their lives.

A few years ago, the Union of Democratic Mineworkers decided to run a test case. The UDM paid for five former miners who had recently been made redundant to have CT scans. The men had all received recent occupational X-rays at the colliery, and each had received the all-clear from those scans, but when the five men went for CT scans, two were diagnosed with pneumoconiosis. Interestingly, two of the other three men were diagnosed with other health issues, which had previously been unseen in the X-rays. Four out of five had conditions that required a CT scan to get a diagnosis. Surely it is clear that former mineworkers are at high risk of many different respiratory health problems, and that a CT scan is the most effective tool for diagnosis.

At present, the reality is that without post-retirement screening for pneumoconiosis, and with standard guidance from the DWP and the Department of Health promoting X-rays for testing, many cases are not picked up until it

[Ben Bradley]

is too late. It is a sad truth that pneumoconiosis is often noted in a patient's file for the first time when they receive a diagnosis of lung cancer or other advanced respiratory illness. That is clearly unacceptable.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman is saying. I just want to mention the compensation scheme. When people are deceased, if somebody other than the widow claims for compensation, it is incredibly onerous and expensive and there are many hurdles in the way. Does he agree that that process needs to be simplified and expensive hurdles scrapped?

Ben Bradley: I agree that it is important that people have access to the compensation that they rightly deserve, and that that should be as simple a process as possible. Key to that is diagnosing the condition in the first place. To get access to that compensation, they have to prove that they have the condition, which has to be diagnosed.

The issue of pneumoconiosis testing has been batted about between the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department of Health and regional clinical commissioning groups for too long. Miners are rightly entitled to compensation and access to benefits as a result of work-related illnesses including pneumoconiosis. The compensation provides lump-sum payments to sufferers and their dependants. The Government have a duty to look after those who suffer from diseases caused by their working environment. Hard-working coalminers deserve their rightful compensation and disability benefits when their working environment has left them with an incurable illness. If individuals are not diagnosed at an early stage, they miss out on not only vital healthcare but the welfare support that they deserve.

To successfully claim compensation, miners must prove that they have pneumoconiosis. Again, this is where we run into issues. The DWP also relies on X-rays to provide evidence of pneumoconiosis for compensation claims. The compensation assessments are problematic. Former miners are frequently tested with digital X-rays, but even the newer technology struggles to pick up on the true condition of the lungs. Often the image is not clear enough to confidently diagnose pneumoconiosis. In such instances, if their claim is denied by the DWP, the miner will lodge an appeal. That takes considerable time and effort, and it will draw on DWP staff time and resources as applications are processed for a second time. In order to appeal the decision, miners may undergo further diagnostic testing, including the all-important CT scan, which is an additional expense and carries an additional exposure to radiation.

The argument against the use of CT scans usually focuses on two elements. One is the cost of the scans compared to that of X-rays, and the other is increased exposure to radiation. In reality, if coalminers with suspected pneumoconiosis do not receive a scan the first time, they are often exposed to repeated X-rays over a long period and then eventually a CT scan anyway—often when their condition has deteriorated. That is more time-consuming in the long run, ultimately costs more and can involve increased exposure to harmful radiation.

In this debate, I am asking not for a radical change to the testing programme for all lung-related compensation and disability claims, but simply an acknowledgment

that former coalminers are at high risk of lung conditions and that the diagnosis of pneumoconiosis, particularly in the early stages, inevitably requires a CT scan rather than an X-ray. There is a clear argument that the Department should consider CT scans as the definitive gold standard for the investigation process in pneumoconiosis claims.

There is a real possibility that thousands of former mineworkers are living with pneumoconiosis, but have no idea that they have the disease. Their occupational X-rays may have showed nothing and, even if they raise health concerns with their GP years later, there is every possibility that they will again receive only an X-ray, which does not show enough detail to diagnose the condition.

The UDM is based in my constituency. I recently met Jeff Wood, the national president, and Ian Gill, the social insurance officer, who work on pneumoconiosis claims. They explained to me in great detail a number of cases that they have personally seen where miners suffered for years without an official diagnosis. It is easy to sit in Parliament and look at issues on paper, but it is important to remember that there are real people behind those studies, and real families who would benefit from a relatively small and easy policy change.

Any former miners who have had unnecessary delays in receiving their diagnosis should receive the compensation and benefits that they are entitled to. I ask the Minister to work with the Department of Health and Social Care to bring about change and to ensure that people who are entitled to support for pneumoconiosis can access it at the earliest opportunity.

There are several clear benefits to the DWP working with the Department of Health and Social Care to replace standard X-rays with CT scans. Earlier diagnosis for patients will allow them to make the necessary lifestyle changes to improve their overall health.

Gloria De Piero: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that when producing new proposals, policies or guidelines, Ministers should consult with the trade unions—not only the Union of Democratic Mineworkers but the National Union of Mineworkers.

Ben Bradley: Of course, it is important that everyone involved is encouraged to talk to GPs and to the Government. I am sure that we can do more with that. I mention the UDM simply because it brought the issue to my attention.

We can achieve earlier access to compensation and benefit support from the DWP. There are potential cost savings for the NHS, because an initial CT scan will help to avoid repeated X-rays, GP appointments and out-patient visits, as well as helping the patient to be healthier and less reliant on those services. There will also be a reduction in the number of appeals to the DWP for compensation claims, because the evidence will be provided in the first instance, and a potential reduction in future disability claims, because sufferers will be able to take action sooner to improve their lung function and overall health before it deteriorates.

The DWP needs to take the lead on what is, of course, a work-related disease. In an ideal world, former mineworkers would be offered additional testing at their GP and local health clinics. We need national

action because, once again, we face a postcode lottery in terms of the support offered to miners. Some areas fare considerably better than others.

In Mansfield, we are lucky that the unions offer support to former miners. There are also other areas of the country where former miners receive brilliant help and support. In Rotherham, the BreathingSpace community service helps people with a wide range of respiratory conditions. It provides a number of health services but, importantly, also helps individuals and families to access welfare and benefits advice. That is an example of unified working across departments, with benefits advice available in a healthcare setting. As ever, the most successful programmes are those that offer a joined-up approach.

I urge the DWP to support that joined-up approach. Ideally, the DWP and the Department of Health and Social Care will agree that a CT scan is the most effective way to diagnose pneumoconiosis. I ask the Minister to commit to a review into whether her Department's assessments for pneumoconiosis compensation can use CT scans as the default diagnostic tool. I hope the DWP will work with the Department of Health and Social Care to make that happen. It is a relatively simple change, which should not be too hard to implement but could make a real difference to thousands of former mineworkers and their families.

I understand that the UDM recently met my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt) when she was a Minister at the DWP, and she expressed sympathy with its campaign. I hope the new Minister will also be inclined to give the issue the immediate attention it deserves.

It is appalling that former miners are suffering unnecessarily and missing out on the compensation and access to benefits that they deserve. There is a postcode lottery and inconsistent access to CT scans. A national system led by the DWP in co-operation with the Department of Health and Social Care could deliver more effective testing and better results. That could help to cut costs, reduce waiting times and most importantly, provide the best support to individuals at the earliest opportunity.

This is not an abstract discussion. The disease affects large numbers of former miners, including people in my constituency, daily, and their families suffer too. It is a progressive disease, but if sufferers are diagnosed at an early stage, they can receive care and support quickly, and access the compensation and benefits that they deserve. We must not let our former coalminers down.

11.14 am

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) on securing this important debate. In his short time in the House, he has proven to be an extremely effective constituency MP. I also acknowledge the contribution of his neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), who has focused continually on pneumoconiosis and its impact on former miners in his constituency. I am pleased to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) in the Chamber, and I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield said, pneumoconiosis is a serious disease that is common—too common—among former miners. It is a sad legacy of their exposure to dust, particularly coal dust, while working in the mines. I reassure him that the Government are committed to supporting former miners who have developed pneumoconiosis. Through the industrial injuries scheme, we spend £900 million a year on weekly benefits to support around 300,000 people for injuries arising from industrial accidents or from specific occupationally caused diseases..

In addition, lump sum payments are available through the Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers' Compensation) Act 1979. In 2016-17, more than 3,000 people received payments under the scheme totalling almost £42 million. Last month, I was pleased to demonstrate our ongoing commitment to that support by proposing measures to increase the value of lump sum awards by 3% from April. The coal industry pneumoconiosis compensation scheme—sometimes referred to as the coal workers pneumoconiosis scheme—is also available and has received 91,000 claims from mineworkers and their families since it was set up.

The hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) raised the issue of processing applications. I would be pleased to receive details of her concerns, because the devil is always in the detail. By reviewing those constituency cases, I can consider what more we can do to improve the process. We want to ensure that people get the compensation that they richly deserve and are entitled to.

I acknowledge the suffering of individuals with the disease. Coal workers' pneumoconiosis, which arises from the inhalation of coal dust, is one of the most commonly occurring types of pneumoconiosis. Thankfully, many ex-miners with pneumoconiosis will have the simple type, which may not be associated with any disabling effects.

If miners continued to work underground and inhale coal dust, however, they have a higher risk of developing severe disabling effects from progressive massive fibrosis, which affects lung function and causes coughs, wheezing and shortness of breath. That is why working miners are regularly screened by X-ray to identify simple pneumoconiosis early and to remove the person from further dust exposure to prevent progressive massive fibrosis.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood and UDM members met my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), to discuss a screening programme for ex-miners using CT scanning or chest X-rays to detect pneumoconiosis. At the end of last year, I consulted with national experts and the deputy chief medical officer on all the issues raised at that meeting.

Importantly, there is a big difference between carrying out medical tests on a person with symptoms and carrying out tests on a healthy person. The symptomatic person needs to know what is wrong with them to get an accurate diagnosis so they can receive the right treatment. A healthy person undergoing a screening test believes that they are healthy, and would continue to do so, facing no risks from health interventions. Because a screening programme risks harming people's health, we demand a high level of evidence to ensure that any screening does no harm and is of genuine overall benefit

[Sarah Newton]

to people. We have looked at all the evidence, and the view was clearly expressed by medical experts that introducing a screening process in the UK would not meet those evidential thresholds and would not be beneficial. When pneumoconiosis is identified, often no treatment is required, and when it is severe, no specific treatment is available. There is no health benefit to identifying pneumoconiosis at an early stage once a miner has left mining.

The advice that I have been given is that the potential harms from screening for pneumoconiosis by X-ray or CT scans vastly outweigh any gains. However, I am mindful of the information that has been shared in this debate, so I think it is important that I set up a follow-up meeting to explore the matter further with my hon. Friends the Members for Mansfield and for Sherwood, with the Department of Health and Social Care, and with the national health service. Other hon. Members will be welcome to come along, because I am sure they want to know that we are leaving no stone unturned and doing the best we can for former miners.

I am aware that the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council—an independent scientific advisory body that looks at how industrial injuries disablement benefit is administered and provides advice to the Department for Work and Pensions—has discussed the use of CT scans for diagnosing pneumoconiosis, including the risks of increased radiation exposure. However, in the light of the issues raised in this debate, I will approach the council anew and ask it to reconsider the use of CT scans and give me further advice, which I will be happy to share with hon. Members.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield rightly spoke about raising awareness among former miners, who too often do not come forward because they assume that having coughs and colds is just part of being a miner or former miner. There is much more that we can do to raise awareness among former miners and their

families and communities, and to encourage them to come forward and speak to a GP. Much work has been done in the last couple of years on improving the care pathways, and a lot more information and training has been given to GPs, so former miners who come forward now will experience a much better quality of care and a rapid assessment, either by X-ray or by CT scan, of whether they have pneumoconiosis.

I am very grateful to hon. Members present, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield, for raising the issue. I assure them that the Government will continue to support former miners who have pneumoconiosis—not just financially, through all the schemes I have described, but by really looking at their diagnosis and health needs.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Very helpfully and constructively, the Minister says that she is planning a meeting with hon. Members. Would she be content for the National Union of Mineworkers, which is based in my constituency, to be represented at that meeting? The NUM would have a constructive contribution to make to the process.

Sarah Newton: Of course. I am happy to work with anyone who makes a constructive contribution to ensuring that former miners are aware of the risks to their health and seek help at the earliest possible stage. We need to support them in getting not only diagnosis and treatment, but compensation, which we are proudly giving to people who suffer in this way. We must remember that miners contracted pneumoconiosis while making a vital contribution to the growth and prosperity of this country. It is only right that they receive our support when they need it most.

Question put and agreed to.

11.24 am

Sitting suspended.

Victims of Crime: Rights

[MRS ANNE MAIN *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the rights of victims of crime.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Main.

When I applied for this debate, little did I know how timely it would be. On Friday night, both our car and our garage were broken into. Nothing was stolen, but the damage to our property and knowing that we are vulnerable to criminals are concerns, and I redoubled my resolve to get better rights for the victims of crime.

Last week, in advance of this debate, I surveyed constituents on their experiences and two of the respondents spoke about the lack of support they had also experienced after being victims of theft from their cars. I also had much more concerning examples, where people were victims of serious incidents and there were serious gaps in provision. One constituent who had been at the Manchester Arena for the Ariana Grande concert when the tragic bombing occurred wrote to me, saying:

“Whilst I appreciate thousands were affected by this event, receiving mental health support since then has been hard work. It has taken 9 months for my daughter and I to receive any kind of support due to long waiting lists, lack of funding etc. I was never advised to contact victim support but was advised to contact survivors assistance network based in Warrington. I am in groups on Facebook and yammer where hundreds say the same thing. Those suffering post-traumatic stress disorder have been ignored unless they had physical injuries.”

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is now touching on the key point. Does he agree that very often victims of crime pay a double penalty—the penalty of the financial loss, from the effect of the crime itself; and then the emotional stress resulting from what has happened?

Alex Sobel: I do, and that is doubly so when there is an event as serious as the Manchester bombing. After that incident, the Government committed to support the victims, but nearly a year later some families are still not receiving the support they need.

When I undertook the survey, a range of crimes were reported to me and often the victims did not feel that they had received sufficient support after crimes ranging from muggings to violent assault to rape. This debate is very much needed, to address the inconsistencies in the system, and I am sure that many hon. Members will also share the experiences of their constituents.

A group in society that is particularly vulnerable to crime is older people. I am grateful to Age UK for releasing a report last week on fraud relating to older people. The report found that more than two fifths—43%—of older people, which is almost 5 million people, believe they have been targeted by scammers. Only a minority of fraud victims report their experience. Among people aged 65-plus, nearly two thirds—64%—of those targeted by fraudsters did not report it to an official body such as Action Fraud, the police, a bank or a local authority. About a third of those targeted confided in friends or family, but more than a fifth admitted they

did not tell anyone at all, because they felt too embarrassed. And for the minority of older people who do report fraud, support is inconsistent across the country.

Age UK has won funding from City Bridge Trust to pilot a new scam prevention and victim support service. Working in partnership with Action Fraud, a number of local Age UK groups in London will raise awareness of scams among older people and their friends and family; they will give one-to-one support to older people who are vulnerable and at risk of scams, empowering them to feel safer and more confident; and they will provide specialist one-to-one support sessions for older victims, helping them to address the financial, health and social impacts of fraud.

This is a great initiative. However, should not such support be available across the country for every older person who needs it, funded by the Government, and using proceeds of crime moneys if the Government cannot pay for it out of general taxation? Our criminal justice system must ensure that it has the rights of victims of crime at its heart.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate, which is very timely. He is talking about the changing nature of crime, so does he agree that the Minister should be considering reviewing the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority, so that its guidelines reflect the changing nature of crime?

Alex Sobel: That is a very good point, well made, and I hope that the Minister will address it in his remarks.

As I was saying, our criminal justice system must ensure that it has the rights of victims of crime at its heart. When it fails to do so, it not only affects the direct victims themselves but risks undermining wider public trust in our justice system.

The most significant reform in this regard was arguably the introduction of the victims code by the last Labour Government, which came into force in 2006. The victims code sets out the rights and entitlements of victims, making it the single most important document for victims of crime in England and Wales. It outlines clearly and precisely the level of entitlement that victims can expect from each criminal justice agency they encounter, including the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service. For example, the code specifies that victims are entitled to be kept informed of developments in their case within set time limits, and that victims must be informed of any sentence handed down to the offender and what it means.

Victim Support has found evidence to suggest that there is a routine failure to uphold the victims code. The lack of compliance could be due to the victims code not being legally enforceable, or the absence of a mechanism to hold agencies to account except in individual cases, or the lack of an independent body to monitor implementation. Current monitoring arrangements rely on statutory agencies self-assessing their compliance, based on criteria determined by the agencies themselves. Effectively, these agencies are self-regulating.

There are new setbacks for victims of crime on the horizon, with the announcement that the Government plan to sell off more than 100 courts for not much more than the average UK house price. That decision piles yet more pressure on the remaining courts and risks hearings

[Alex Sobel]

being further delayed and rescheduled, which can have a distressing impact on victims and witnesses and creates a justice system that is less accessible for people.

The Victims' Commissioner has within their remit a duty to

"keep under review the operation of the Code of Practice".

The current Victims' Commissioner, Baroness Newlove, has conducted a number of reviews of the code, looking at issues such as the victim personal statement, children's entitlements and the complaints system. A number of other agencies have also looked at compliance with the victims code in some form, including the CPS, which undertook a victim and witness satisfaction survey in 2015 and plans to repeat the research, and the criminal justice inspectorates.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): The hon. Gentleman has brought a very important issue to Westminster Hall this afternoon. I am particularly concerned about the effect of the problems in the disclosure system of the CPS and other agencies for victims. I have had considerable problems with child sexual exploitation in my constituency. Those victims are particularly vulnerable. Is that something that he is also worried about?

Alex Sobel: I am very glad that the hon. Lady has raised this issue. It is not something that I have personally had experience of, but I am sure that her points are really well made and I hope that the Minister addresses them in his remarks.

Finally, victims' organisations such as Victim Support have also looked at compliance with the code by means of research that has examined different issues, including the timeliness of victim contact. However, all these reviews have been piecemeal, looking at certain aspects of the code but not at the code's operation as a whole. There is a gap in the system, and an effective monitoring and enforcement mechanism would enable the Government to ensure that the victims code is implemented throughout the system, as well as identifying both good practice and areas for improvement.

Last year, Victim Support published research undertaken with almost 400 victims, which highlighted the failings inherent in the system. These failings include the fact that 52% of victims surveyed were not offered the chance to make a victim personal statement; that 46% of victims surveyed had not received a written acknowledgment of the crime from the police; and that 19% had not been referred to support services. So, nearly one in five of the people who responded were not even referred to support services. As things stand, too many people are being failed by the system, so things need to change.

What do victims of crime need from the Government? Victims must always feel that the justice system is on their side. When a member of the public comes forward to report a crime or to give evidence in court, they must be treated fairly and with compassion. When all is said and done, we must do our utmost to ensure that victims receive the justice they deserve.

What is needed is a victims' law, which the 2015 Conservative party manifesto pledged to introduce; the Minister will find that pledge on page 59. In the 2015 Queen's Speech, the Government announced:

"Measures will be brought forward to increase the rights of victims of crime."—[*Official Report*, 27 May 2015; Vol. 596, c. 31.]

In 2016, the EU victims' directive forced the Government to enhance support for victims of crime by broadening the definition of "victim". Previously, for example, victims of drink-driving did not receive support under the victims code, and not all victims of crime were entitled to a written acknowledgment from the police.

In 2017, the Conservative manifesto again contained a commitment to enshrine victims' entitlements in law. However, aside from a recent and welcome announcement that there will be consultation on new legislation to support victims of domestic abuse, there appears to have been little action by the Government to bring forward their victims' law commitment. I want to see victims' support at the heart of the criminal justice system and historic wrongs put right.

A victims' law would seek to guarantee victims a minimum standard of service, including placing victims' right to review on a statutory footing, not only for the CPS but for the police, too. It must be made easier to hold justice organisations to account if we are to maintain confidence in the criminal justice system. I therefore ask the Minister to introduce proposals for a victims' law that fulfils the historic commitment.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Quite a few right hon. and hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye. I will call the Front Benchers at half-past 3. I call Kevin Foster.

2.40 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Thank you for calling me so early, Mrs Main. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) on securing this debate on such a major issue. I will explore how victims are heard and the penalties for offenders, and how they relate to the changing nature of crime and to people actually realising that they are victims, which is a particular issue for some of my constituents.

I have always been a fan of more restorative justice. St Martin's church in Barton in my constituency was attacked by vandals who were just over the age of criminal responsibility. A restorative path was chosen, as it was felt that the two individuals coming to the church, meeting the vicar and hearing from the churchwarden about the effect of what they had done would have a far greater impact on them than a police officer bluntly giving them a caution, or their potentially going before a youth court. The church continues to engage with the two young men and their families, trying to make them see clearly that the church is part of the community and the impact on those who were damaged.

On a wider scale, the offender management team in Torbay tries to use more restorative justice, particularly for lower-level offending that would not attract significant terms of imprisonment. Genuine restorative justice can be more effective than a blunt fine, which might disappear into a court or be added to a list of other fines being paid off via earnings or welfare benefits attachments; it can be something that might stick in someone's memory.

It has been interesting talking to the local police in Torbay about an emerging trend, whereby people—mostly older men—with assets are targeted by ruthless individuals who look to exploit them by forming a relationship with them, even a sexual one, with the purpose of getting at their bank balance and draining their assets. When it is happening, many of these people do not realise they are victims; some might not even see it after the person unsurprisingly disappears, when the money starts to run out or when other members of the family start to get involved. How do we get people to understand the nature of being a victim today? Some people do not see it, and some fail to understand what their assets are worth—some who are starting to suffer dementia will not realise that the price of something 30 or 40 years ago is not its value today.

Sarah Champion: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that when the person involved has learning difficulties or mental health issues the crime needs to be designated as a hate crime and afforded the additional sentence for the perpetrator?

Kevin Foster: The courts should certainly consider it an aggravating factor if someone is vulnerable. However, it is a difficult line to draw for people who have not yet been diagnosed or been deemed to have lack of capacity—those who are still able to manage themselves and their finances in day-to-day life. They might have started to lose track of exactly what they are worth, or they might not have been as wealthy in their younger days but have now had a retirement golden handshake or have bought a house or another asset that is worth far more than they realise. I agree that the courts should certainly consider that as an aggravating factor, because this is almost the ultimate breach of trust: someone professing love and affection, targeting the fact that someone is vulnerable and lonely.

For me, this is also about victims coming forward. I am pleased to see some of the efforts being made regarding domestic abuse, including the Bill that is to be introduced. I will not give their name, because it is not appropriate, but someone I am very close to was a victim of domestic abuse for more than 30 years. For most of that period, they did not realise that they were a victim; they thought that that was what most marriages were like—husbands beat their wives. It was only when others started to guess what was going on that they realised that they were a victim of very serious offences. The offender has now passed away.

I am conscious that other colleagues would like to speak, so I will conclude by saying that I welcome this debate. It is important that victims are at the heart of the criminal justice system and are the ones who matter; they are not just a statement of evidence or part of a case. Justice has to be seen to be done, not just according to the law but according to the victims as well.

2.45 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I am sure all Members will recognise the feeling I am about to describe, although perhaps with a different landmark in mind: when I travel home after a long week here, I see the Humber bridge and know that that means home—I am nearly there; it is not far to go. Home should be the place where we feel the safest, where we feel secure, but sadly, for many of my constituents and

many others around the country, crime and antisocial behaviour are hitting them right in the heart of their lives—in their home. I will use my speech today to raise my constituents' concerns about antisocial behaviour. Sometimes it is dismissed as not really a big deal, but in reality it affects the lives of many people.

My constituency is a wonderful place to live and grow up in, but sadly many areas are now blighted by antisocial behaviour. In the Hessle part of the constituency, I hear many reports of children creating lots of difficulties—for example, running in front of buses and making them do emergency stops with the passengers still on them, upsetting people in the street, throwing dog dirt through pub doors, damaging car park fences, standing on signs, climbing on to walls and generally making people feel unsafe and unhappy in what is a wonderful community and place to live. An elderly lady told me that as she was walking down the street, groups of young people passing on their bikes shouted abuse at her; she is now worried about what might happen when she goes out to do her shopping.

Sadly, that is not the only area of my constituency where there are problems. I have been contacted by residents of the Great Thornton Street flats, an inner-city tower block, who are being subjected to hate crime. Some of them are having their scarves pulled off their heads. They are witnessing drug abuse and violence and even finding human faeces in the corners outside their homes. The situation is no better in Bean Street, where there is much public drug taking and antisocial behaviour. I have been told that on more than one occasion a nearby park has attracted drinkers and drug users shooting up in broad daylight.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I apologise for not being here at the start of the debate, Mrs Main. My hon. Friend refers to hate crime and I wondered whether she was aware that some of us Muslim Members of Parliament have been victims of a hate crime on the parliamentary estate today and yesterday. I could not be here at 2.30 pm because I was dealing with the aftermath of a suspicious package intended for me, which was opened by one of my staff.

My hon. Friend talks about crime at home. Does she not agree that thousands of British people abroad who are victims of crime need a better support system? My constituent Susan Sutovic—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady was late. I have allowed the explanation but she is making an extremely long intervention. Perhaps the speaker will reply.

Emma Hardy: Yes, I would support that. I am so sorry to hear about the incident that my hon. Friend mentions and I sincerely hope that she and her staff are okay. It is sad to hear about the increasing amount of hate crime.

I am trying to arrange residents meetings with the police on the issues in Hessle, Bean Street and Great Thornton Street. Previously, we had success when there were problems with an awful lot of street drinkers in Spring Bank. We removed the bench where they were sitting and there have been 46 move-ons for people drinking when they should not be and creating antisocial behaviour problems. The police have been fantastic, but my fear is that all we are doing by going in with this

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intensive support from the police and the community is relocating the problem around the city. We never deal with the root cause of the problem or provide a long-term solution; we just move it to another place. Yes, the work on Spring Bank has been successful, but now we have a problem on Bean Street and Great Thornton Street.

Some people dismiss antisocial behaviour. While it may be a different category of crime from some of the others we are discussing, it has a massive effect on people's lives. It is sad, because often those most in need of help are those least able to seek it. Crime and antisocial behaviour affect people of all incomes and backgrounds, but it seems that the poorest and most vulnerable are disproportionately affected. Sad to say, I do not see the situation changing; because of the cuts to the police service, dealing with the problem will only get much harder.

One of the easiest ways to help victims of crime is to stop crime and antisocial behaviour happening in the first place. A long-term solution needs investment in education, community support and youth provision. I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) talk about the use of restorative justice. Instead of taking a one-size-fits-all approach, it looks at the individuals and the best method to stop them reoffending. More things like that should be happening, especially for younger people committing crimes. I hope that the whole House will therefore join me and my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) as we push to make youth provision statutory, which would force all councils to establish youth provision.

One parent of a child who has been involved in some of the antisocial behaviour contacted me, asking for my help. She said, "Where can my child go? What services are out there? What support can I have?" When family support services have been cut, when youth provision has been cut, and when those families are not getting the support they need when they need it, we cannot be surprised when we see an increase in antisocial behaviour. I am sorry to say that schools are facing the same cuts as well. Perhaps they cannot give as much support as they used to. From the inquiry we are doing in the Education Committee, the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) will know about the increased number of children going into alternative provision and being moved on. We need to look at the problem holistically.

Even with more action taken to prevent crime, we still need to protect and promote the rights of victims of crime and ensure that there are minimum standards a victim can expect once they report a crime or antisocial behaviour. Those standards should include a single point of contact and a single complaints system where someone can go if they want to make a complaint. One of my constituents' main complaints is that they want the phone answered quickly when they ring 101. Too many people hang up because they are waiting 20 minutes to get through. They get so fed up that the crimes are never accurately recorded.

We need to ensure better communication with victims about the outcome of their cases. A lot of people say, "What happened? I reported this and nothing happened." We look into it, and actually something did happen, but no one thought to tell the victims about it. We need a more powerful Victims' Commissioner to ensure that

victims can make their voices heard. For too long, victims of crime have been left without a voice. By listening to those proposals and acting proactively to prevent crime and promote victims' rights, the Government have a chance to end the merry-go-round of constantly shifting crime hotspots.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Before I call Bob Neill, I ask that Members are mindful that a lot of Members wish to speak in this debate.

2.53 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I will do my best to be naturally short. [Laughter.] I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) on securing this debate on an important subject.

I will start where the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) began, which is how victims are treated once a crime has been committed. Constituents in Chislehurst have suffered a spate of residential burglaries. The burglaries are professional, planned and committed with an extraordinary degree of chutzpah. In some cases, the burglars have returned to the same road on more than one occasion within a couple of weeks. The burglaries are of a serious kind: occupants of houses have been threatened—in some cases, they have been young children, and in others, they have been elderly people. The police have many pressures and it is not always possible to find much evidence at the scene. In the case of those professional burglaries, the people have escaped, but there are forensics to be done.

It is important that all police forces recognise that dealing with the victims of crime and investigating crime are not purely transactional processes. A proper duty of care for victims is important. A domestic burglary is peculiarly intrusive and a violation of people's homes and lives. The hon. Lady fairly made a point about proper points of contact and proper updates and information, which are critical. It is important that a degree of urgency is applied to offences of this kind, even in a large police force such as the Met. There is resource within the budget. I know there are pressures, but priority should be given to dealing with those sorts of issues and keeping people informed.

I want to talk about the operation of the criminal justice system as it impacts victims. The Justice Select Committee, which I have the honour to chair, has looked at that in a number of areas. I start with the point that was made by the hon. Member for Leeds North West about delays in the court process, which are a problem. My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who is a fellow member of the Select Committee, referred to that in the context of disclosure problems causing delays and adjournments, which puts great stress on victims who have come to court or readied themselves to give evidence. It is important that we work—I know the Government recognise this—with the judiciary at all levels, from the professional judiciary to the magistracy, and with the Crown Prosecution Service, because many delays arise from failure to meet the proper protocols on disclosure by prosecutors. We need to ensure that we take a whole-system approach so that such delays are reduced to a minimum.

The experience of victims giving evidence needs to be made as palatable as possible. Any witness has to expect to be properly cross-examined, and any defendant has the right to have the case against them tested, but there are parameters in which that must be done decently and without undue pressure. The Government have recognised that in the cross-examination of victims of domestic abuse. It is important that we build upon the work already done on the pre-recorded cross-examination of witnesses and the use of video links. We must ensure that the video links work, which sadly is not always the case in every court. We therefore have to ensure that the court estate and technology are up to speed. That is an important thing we need to do now.

I am glad to see the Minister in his place. I know he is very engaged with these matters, and I recently wrote to him about the position of training and mentoring for registered intermediaries. Court intermediaries provide communication support for vulnerable witnesses—many of them are victims, but there may be other vulnerable witnesses, too. There appears to have been a significant reduction in the period of training they undergo. Can the Minister offer some explanation, either now or subsequently, as to why that has happened? I accept there are pressures, but can he give us an assurance that he will ensure that the level of service provided to vulnerable people assisting in the court process to try to deliver justice is not diminished? I am sure he will be aware that the Victims' Commissioner's research indicates poor overall management in the governance of intermediaries and a lack of funding. They perform an important role, and I hope the issue can be taken much more seriously.

I will briefly move on to restorative justice and the victims' law, which was referred to by the hon. Member for Leeds North West. One of the proposals that the Select Committee made was that any victims' law should include a right not just to information about restorative justice, as is the case at the moment, but a right of access to it. Provision is extremely patchy across the country. Some police and crime commissioners—I am delighted to see the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) in his place; he did a great deal as the police and crime commissioner for Greater Manchester—engage in that, but others do not. It is important that the Government perhaps do more to enforce a proper minimum standard. There is always scope for local variation to meet local needs, but a basic standard must be adhered to in all cases. If we are going to have a right, it is important that we have a means of enforcing it and some remedy if it is not actually delivered. That was reported on at some length in our Committee's report of September 2016, which was debated in Westminster Hall in January 2017. The Government indicated that they were taking steps; we welcomed those, and urge them to do more, as more needs to be done. I hope that the Minister can confirm that work is continuing on this matter, and that the Government remain committed to a victims' law. Can he give us some sense of when we are likely to see more proposals on that?

Finally, it is important and topical for us to consider the role of victims when Parole Board decisions are made. I will not say anything about any particular case that is sub judice, but we must examine this issue. The point about communication is hugely important. My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster)

talked about restorative justice in that context. We have to have a whole-system approach. It is not just about when the person is sentenced and dealt with.

Victoria Prentis: Does my hon. Friend agree that we should look at both statutory victims and the wider collection of victims in that context?

Robert Neill: That is absolutely right. That is a most important matter. The chair of the Parole Board himself, Professor Nick Hardwick, to whom I pay tribute for his openness with us, recognises that the current rules are not as he would wish them to be. They sometimes make it hard for the Parole Board to be as transparent as it would like to be, for the benefit of either the victim or the general public. On the face of it, that is a difficult distinction to justify in some cases, so I hope that in due course the Government will look at that. It indicates to me a need for a much more holistic approach to how we look at victims throughout both the investigatory process and the criminal justice process.

I commend the hon. Member for Leeds North West for securing the debate, and look forward to the Minister's response.

3.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in today's debate. I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) for presenting the case, and for giving us all more time than there might have been to speak on the matter. I am also conscious that you have indicated the timescale to which we all have to try to adhere, Mrs Main.

The issue of victims is incredibly sensitive and needs to be handled with care. There are many victims of physical, emotional and sexual assault who have been re-traumatised—I have said this before, in questions to the Minister in the Chamber—through the handling of their case. Many victims will not come forward, as they feel as if they are on trial themselves, and are not supported. I recently read an article on abortion by a baroness in Ireland. Although this is not the debate in which to bring up the abortion issue, I felt it was significant that she lost her baby as she was caught up in an IRA bombing. She describes herself and her child as victims, and remains traumatised to this day. Time has not healed that wound; she feels the pain of loss to this day, and will do so beyond. This is how we need to consider victims: not that something once happened to them, but that their life was irrevocably changed, and that that change has become part of their day-to-day life. They need care and help to go over that, and to deal with the aftermath.

We have a duty to victims to ensure that they are heard and supported. That was what was agreed when we passed the legislation, and voted to help to make victims feel secure and to create a system whereby crimes could be prosecuted, and victims could feel safe and able to feed into the process. Although the spirit of the current legislation agrees with that, there is no enforcement process. I ask the Minister how we move from guidelines and perceived support to enforcement.

It is little wonder that Baroness Newlove's report in January 2015, "A Review of Complaints and Resolution for Victims of Crime", found not very satisfactory results—that is how it was reported. It surveyed the experiences of some 200 victims and found that

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almost 75% were unhappy with the response they received. More than 50% found the relevant agency's complaints process difficult to use. Have we moved on from that? Is the process easier? Is it more relevant?

A second review, "The Silenced Victim: A Review of the Victim Personal Statement", was published in November 2015. It found inconsistencies in approach, with six out of 10 victims not recalling being offered the chance to make a victim personal statement. That also illustrates the things that we need to be addressing. I look to the Minister to see whether he can address those issues and give us the responses that we wish to hear.

To me, this says that what we set out to achieve through the legislation is not being achieved. We therefore need to make changes. First, we need to stop it being no more than a guideline or a suggestion, and ensure that it is enforceable and as much a duty in the prosecution of a case as any other aspect, such as evidence gathering.

Dr Hug: The hon. Gentleman talked about there not always being an audit trail. Does he agree with me that when victims of crime are abroad, such as my constituent Susan Sutovic, whose son died in mysterious circumstances in 2004 in Serbia, there needs to be some sort of diplomatic and legal framework to help those victims?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention; I agree with her. It is important that we have a framework in place. Hopefully the Minister, who I know is taking notes on the debate, will give us some response on how he sees that changing.

The care of the victim must be paramount and be seen as part and parcel of the justice system. I agree with the options presented in the Victim Support manifesto. There should be a single complaints system for victims of crime, a more powerful Victims' Commissioner, and better communication with victims about the outcomes of their case—how often that falls down. Court compensation should be paid immediately and not linger on for months or sometimes years. Trained intermediaries should be available for all child witnesses—I know a lot of Members in the Chamber feel as strongly as I do about that. No child should be obliged to enter a court building to give evidence. There should be pre-trial therapy for all victims of sexual crimes, and a national strategy for victims with mental health issues. Like others, I feel strongly on behalf of children about how their cases are handled. Again, I look to the Minister to see what help he can give us.

It is essential that these foundations, which are not currently in place, are in place for victims. The end goal is justice for the crime and for the victim. The crime has to have the right sentence, but the victim must also feel part of the process and feel that they are not being put upon by the court system. I hate to hear of crimes that could not be prosecuted as the key witness is frightened to come forward. Knowing that a system is in place to support victims is a key component in the prosecution of crimes. Again, I look to the Minister for a response on that.

I will conclude, as I am conscious of the time I agreed with you beforehand, Mrs Main. I again thank the hon. Member for Leeds North West for introducing the debate. I thank Baroness Newlove for her hard work in

making a difference to the lives and experiences of victims. It is now in the hands of the Government—and perhaps the Minister in this case—to bring forward the promised changes. I for one will be eagerly awaiting the legislation that is to be introduced.

3.6 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Thank you, Mrs Main, for allowing me to speak in this important debate. I am delighted that the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) has given us the opportunity to talk about the rights of victims and some of the difficulties that they have in getting their voices heard.

I particularly want to talk about the victims of child exploitation, following revelations in newspapers over the weekend in my constituency. These victims have more difficulties than most in getting heard, and in identifying that they are indeed victims, as my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) identified. Child sexual exploitation is not just any crime. It affects whole communities up and down the country; it is not just Telford. It is a crime about fear, manipulation, coercion, shame, control, and sometimes blame. All too often, the victims are ignored. They are victims who do not have a voice, and for whom very few people will stand up and speak. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for the amazing work that she has done in this field over so many years. She has given a voice to victims, and has set a precedent for us to follow in this House.

These young girls are too often white and working-class, and have multiple vulnerabilities. That is why the perpetrators are targeting them, and why they are so often miscast as bringing it on themselves, as indulging in risky behaviour, as being promiscuous and as somehow being to blame for what is happening to them. In their own minds, they often internalise the sense that they are somehow at fault.

When a 13 or 14-year-old girl is befriended by a 35-year-old man who gives her affection and cigarettes, tops up her phone, and tells her that she is beautiful and that he loves her, sometimes she feels affection for him. She does not realise that when he asks her to share a sexual image of herself, that will lead to something worse—something that she will not want to do. The coercion begins when he says, "If you don't have sex with me"—or, "If you don't have sex with my friend"—"I'm going to out you as promiscuous," or as a "sket", as they say in Telford. That is when it becomes a crime, but at that point, a 13 or 14-year-old does not know that what is happening is rape and child sexual exploitation. If she goes to the police, what does she say? She does not say, "I am a victim of statutory rape." She says, "I'm being harassed by this person. He's threatened to take a picture and put it on Facebook. He's threatened to tell my mum that I'm a prostitute."

Too often, victims of such terrible crimes do not articulate what is happening to them, so we have to be incredibly sensitive with them. Too often, they are not heard because of their vulnerabilities. I worry that a difficult family background or drugs and alcohol or mental health issues at home mean that victims are thought of as troublemakers and just a bit too difficult. Perhaps that is why these crimes were not identified for so long. Had the girls been from a different background and able to articulate more clearly what was happening

to them, or able to identify that it was a crime, perhaps we would not have the cases that we see in Telford, Rotherham and Oxford.

Sarah Champion: I want to get on the record how incredible the hon. Lady has been for those women and girls. She is giving them a voice and empowering them to be heard. I am honoured to be here listening to her speech. I am sorry this is not an appropriate intervention, but it needed to be said.

Lucy Allan: I thank the hon. Lady for her encouragement and the inspiration that she provides to me and others in speaking out on this matter.

Interestingly, each child sexual exploitation case bears some resemblance to others. They all start in the same way and progress in the same way, from something that seems quite acceptable, tame or innocent into something horrific: trading young girls for sex for money. They are traded and handed around with the threat of violence to them or their families, or the threat of exposure and shame that I talked about earlier. The victims need to know that they have not done anything wrong. They need to know that they are victims, and that a crime has been committed against them. That is why I am asking for an independent investigation into what has gone wrong in Telford. I first made the request in 2016, when there were revelations about what had happened. That request was turned down by the local authorities in Telford, who felt that there was no need at that time.

Further revelations have come to light. Nothing in the interim has changed my mind that an independent investigation will give victims a sense that they are being listened to. It will also give them answers as to why the situation went on for so long and why no action was taken. How did it happen? Why are our young girls being traded for sex in what has become a routine way? Whether it is from takeaways, taxis or betting shops, it is happening in our streets.

By not addressing what went wrong, victims are left feeling that in some sense they were at fault. It ignores what happened and perpetuates the silence. We have to break that silence and say it is okay to talk about this, and that it will not bring shame on Oxford, Telford or Rotherham or on their families. They are the victims and they need to be heard, listened to and given the protection that they need and deserve. Being questioned and questioned is an ordeal, and sometimes they feel they are not believed, but we must believe those young people and give them a sense that they will be listened to. There should not be opposition to finding out the facts and what went wrong.

There is a national inquiry into child sexual exploitation led by Professor Jay. That inquiry will not get to the bottom of why these things happened or give answers to my constituents in Telford. I urge the Minister, or anybody listening, to please put pressure on the authorities. It is for the good of our community and the victims and their families, because the families are victims too. They feel they failed their children and let them down. They suffer because their child has experienced terrible things. We must not allow these crimes to be minimised. They are not trivial. I am not talking about a girl with a 35-year-old boyfriend; I am talking about someone who is abused, exploited and sold for sex. We should not shy away from that and bury our heads in the sand.

I will draw to a close, but while the Minister is here I want to quickly mention the early release from prison of Mubarak Ali, a ringleader in Telford. He had been sentenced to 22 years—14 years in custody and eight years on licence—and he was released only five years after the trial. That caused a lot of shock, fear and anxiety among the people brave enough to come forward to give evidence, and the victim contact scheme let them down. More work must be done to ensure that victims are kept informed and can feed into the process and have the opportunity to be heard. We must listen and hear the voices of those children.

3.16 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) for securing this really important debate. We have heard many important contributions. Like the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan), I have had to live through the aftermath of child sexual exploitation in my area. She is absolutely right in everything she says. We must never blame the victims. We must stand up and speak out for victims of criminal behaviour. I encourage her to continue to demand that there is proper insight. In the end, all local agencies must demonstrate that they have genuinely, not formulaically, learnt lessons. They must demonstrate a different way of working that makes it more likely that we ask questions when a 14-year-old has a 35-year-old boyfriend.

I will make a few brief points, Mrs Main, because I know you are anxious to bring in the Front-Bench speakers at—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): At 15.29, so you have a while. Ms Huq may or may not wish to speak.

Tony Lloyd: I will not take long, in that case. The comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) are really important. Antisocial behaviour matters. Actually, it kills in the worst situations, and even if we are not talking about those extremes it certainly makes people's lives miserable. It destroys the quality of people's lives and we must take that seriously. She is right. Obviously, this can be a political point, but the Government must take it on board that it has become much more difficult now for our police to investigate things that fall off the radar, which they simply ought not. It is an important issue to raise.

Like the hon. Members for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster), I am a big supporter of restorative justice. I regret that I was not in the House in 2016 to speak on the Select Committee report, but I was aware of its conclusions. Restorative justice fundamentally delivers to victims the sense that their needs are being taken seriously. That is as important in prosecutions as when there is a decision not to take a case forward, which can sometimes be appropriate.

I think of the case of a woman who was a very strong advocate. Other hon. Members might have heard her speak. Her house was burgled and a new camera was taken. Sadly, her daughter was killed in a car crash weeks later and the last remaining photographs of her daughter were lost with the camera. She never saw the photographs but she was prepared to work with the perpetrator, who went to prison. That was important for at least giving her a sense of easement, although you

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can never reconcile yourself to the loss of a child. It also meant that that long-term burglar effectively ceased his former habit, so it worked in more than one way, but—there is always a “but”—training is absolutely important. We cannot see the process as something to be delivered on the streets, with no training. There must be supervision to ensure that standards are maintained. Importantly, there must be victim volition. The process cannot be forced on a victim, or denied to a victim who is not aware that they could demand it. I support the call for a statutory framework, and of course my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West argued for that.

Robert Neill: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is back in the House after a brief gap. I hope he will take part in further debates. Given what he has said, does he agree on the importance of the point made in the Justice Committee report, that restorative justice must always be victim-led—the victim’s choice at all times—and that there must be proper professional support right the way through? It is important that victims be given full information about what is available in their area, and that something genuinely meaningful should be in place—not simply a leaflet.

Tony Lloyd: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman—let me say my hon. Friend for the sake of this debate—is right on both counts. The second point is fundamental in bringing about the first, because if victims do not have confidence in the process it withers. It is not just victims, in fact, because the community must have confidence, through the victims, that the decisions are not arbitrary, and will deliver something to victims and do something more generally to change behaviour. In the end, the process is about helping victims and changing perpetrators’ behaviour.

Perhaps I may now touch on the rather more aggressive side of what, sadly, happens to victims. Sometimes victims are treated horrendously within the processes. I know that the Minister is sympathetic to these points. Many years ago, I dealt with a grieving family whose son had been stabbed to death at a party. The charge was murder and the case took many months, as such cases do, to come to court. Eventually, on the day of the trial, the family were told that the murder charge could not be sustained, because the prosecuting barrister had said he could not deliver it on the available evidence. No other charge of manslaughter or lesser offences had been brought, and that meant that the two perpetrators went scot-free. The family were left devastated.

That was a long time ago and I would be happy if I could say that those were the bad old days and that things have moved on. However, they have not. Victims still sometimes find that the failure of the prosecution service to examine information in time, or the failure of the courts to process cases, means they face a long journey between becoming a victim and their case coming to court, only to find that when it gets to court they are left frustrated and dissatisfied.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is highlighting important issues to do with the CPS and the rights of victims. Does he agree that one thing that undermines victims of crime is the Crown’s inability to appeal against sentences that are simply too lenient?

That can happen only in a very few cases at the moment, and victims of crime feel powerless under the current system to ensure that the appropriate sentence is imposed on an offender.

Tony Lloyd: I have a lot of sympathy with that point. The procedure could not be used in every case, but perhaps society should recognise the need to use it more widely than happens now. Sometimes the courts do get things wrong.

I do not want to go into too much detail about the next case I shall mention. A young woman was effectively kidnapped from a bar, and it was believed that she had been raped. She had certainly been sexually assaulted. She faced months of adjournments and new trial dates. In the end, the case came to court more than two and a half years from the original event. The perpetrator had been charged with rape and the prosecution counsel determined only at a late stage that it was not possible, on the evidence, to sustain that charge. Because no other charges had been laid—not kidnap or sexual assault, which are pretty serious charges—the perpetrator walked free, as in my other example. That is human incompetence, and for the victim it was outrageous. I have spoken to her, and had she known what would happen she would never have consented to the case’s going forward.

Those are cases of human error, but such human error is systemic within the present system. Prosecuting barristers often do not come to the cases until late in the process. We must do something about that. We must begin to put victims first in the criminal justice system, rather than treating them as an afterthought. We are not at that point yet.

3.25 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) on securing the debate today and on setting out so well many of the issues within the justice system. It has been an excellent debate, with a huge degree of consensus across the Chamber about the need to improve victims’ rights on a number of fronts, for a number of reasons. I wholeheartedly agree with the concern that many colleagues have raised about the victim contact scheme. That problem needs to be addressed as a priority.

I want to mention the speech by the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who highlighted the case of a friend who was the victim of domestic abuse for many years without realising it. Sadly, that situation is repeated often, the length and breadth of the country, and I look forward to the Government’s bringing forward a domestic abuse Bill shortly. That will be discussed at the meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on the white ribbon campaign at 4.45, later this afternoon.

No one ever imagines that they will be a victim of crime, and if, sadly, it happens, many will be unsure of the process involved, beyond phoning the police, and unsure of what their rights are as a victim. It will obviously be a traumatic experience, and not only is it important that we have an effective set of rights for victims of crime, but it is vital that those rights be clearly and sensitively communicated in the aftermath

of crime. As the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), who is no longer in his place, said, too often victims are punished twice.

A recent Supreme Court ruling highlighted the way in which the system might fail victims. It stated that a police force breached the human rights of victims by failing to investigate complaints properly. That ruling has serious implications for the rights of victims. If police fail to investigate a serious violent crime effectively in the future, they could be sued under the Human Rights Act 1998.

High-profile recent cases have raised immediate concerns about victims' rights. However, there has been concern for some time that victims may not be receiving the full breadth of support to which they should be entitled. As we have heard, in England and Wales the Victims' Commissioner has highlighted problems with the complaints system, and inconsistency about allowing victims the right to make a victim personal statement. As the hon. Member for Leeds North West mentioned, Victim Support has also called for a new, clearly enforceable victims' law, setting out eight proposals to strengthen the rights of victims. They include creating a single complaints system for victims, introducing a more powerful Victims' Commissioner, providing greater protection and support to children who experience crime, and improving communication with victims about the outcomes of their case. I hope that, as the hon. Member for Leeds North West asked, the Minister will provide an update on the Government's thinking on a victims' law.

The rights of victims are currently set out in the code of practice for victims of crime and there is an explanation of what they should expect from the various bodies within the criminal justice system. Despite the fact that that charter is on the statute book, it seems that not all victims are being afforded those key entitlements. Failure to comply with the code of practice does not in itself make a person liable to criminal or civil proceedings. The Scottish Government take the protection and support of victims of crime seriously. The Scottish National party has long recognised the need to provide the right information and, crucially, the right support to those affected by crime. That plays a key part in a modern justice system that is fair, accessible, and efficient for everyone.

The Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2014 introduced various measures to protect and enhance the rights of victims, and it focused on providing direct assistance and information to those who experience a crime. It included new rights for victims to access information about their case, and the publication of standards of services by justice organisations. The victims code for Scotland sets out the rights and entitlements that someone can expect. Those rights are statutory, and the code sets out the minimum standard of service that someone should expect, and explains how they will be treated by criminal justice organisations. The Scottish Government recently published "Guidance for the Delivery of Restorative Justice in Scotland", which outlines the process that allows victims the opportunity to communicate the impact of crime on their lives, in the hope that they will regain some control.

We are debating the rights of victims but—with apologies, Mrs Main—there is one issue we have not mentioned: Brexit. Currently, the UK Government have signed up to the 2012 EU directive that deals with rights, support

for and protection of victims of crime. The directive aims to ensure that a consistent level of legal and emotional support is offered to victims, helping them to be fully involved in criminal justice proceedings. Thus far, the Government have failed to provide assurances that those common standards of legal and practical support will continue post-Brexit, but the UK can act unilaterally and ensure that those rights continue. We do not want a diminution of standards in the protection offered to victims in England, Wales, or anywhere else in the UK. Will the Minister confirm whether the UK will continue to participate in the 2012 directive, or make arrangements to ensure that those rights continue?

Victims' rights should be placed at the heart of any justice system that works for all, but we must do more to support them. The Government have a duty to ensure that victims are provided with the maximum level of support and help during that traumatic period. The various legal jurisdictions in the UK can be rightly proud of their judicial history—indeed, much of the legal world looks up to our systems. However, there are warning signs in England and Wales. A modern justice system relies on being fair and accessible to all, and that includes supporting victims, so that they can play their full part in the pursuit of justice. The UK Government must step up to the mark to ensure that they get it.

3.32 pm

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Main, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) on securing this debate. We have heard the varying experiences of victims of crime discussed from many different angles, but if I had to single out one contribution, I would say that the remarkable speech by the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) should not go unnoted.

All the speakers focused on one point: too often, victims are still the forgotten voice in the criminal justice system. We are rightly proud of checks and balances in our legal system that prevent innocent people from being convicted, but for the victim it can often feel as if their rights are an afterthought compared with the rights of the perpetrator. No victim of serious crime should ever feel that they are battling to be believed, yet that is still the experience of far too many people who have the courage to come forward. Victims often talk about feeling like an afterthought; they are not kept informed of key decisions about the case, or they are not given a sufficient explanation for why a case is not being taken forward. If they manage to get their case to court, the distress does not stop; instead, victims can face a repeat of the original trauma. They may be forced to face the perpetrator in court, and in some instances they are even cross-examined by them, reliving every detail of the crime. Victims do not want their rights to be put above those of the accused; they simply want fairness. Despite progress, our system is still re-victimising the vulnerable, and deterring victims from coming forward and seeking justice.

Now for the politics. The 2015 Conservative manifesto adopted the recommendations of Labour's victims' taskforce, and promised victims that a Conservative Government would deliver

"a new Victims' Law that will enshrine key rights for victims"

[Gloria De Piero]

That was three years ago. In the 2015 Queen's Speech, the Government again promised to introduce legislation, "putting the key entitlements of the Victims' Code in primary legislation."

Victims waited, but no legislation came. Twelve months later, in the next Queen's Speech, there was no mention of a victims' law—apparently that was no longer a priority for Government. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) tabled an amendment to the Policing and Crime Bill and sought to put the key elements of the victims code in law. Ministers blocked those amendments, promising instead to produce their own strategy for victims "within 12 months". Well, it has now been 12 months, so last month I asked the Minister where the strategy was, and I was told that it would come "after Easter". We now hear that it could be more like summer before any recommendations are published.

Victims have waited long enough. As other hon. Friends have asked, where is the victims' law that was promised by the Conservative Government in 2015? Why has it taken three years? Victims who have been let down time and again by the system feel that they are being let down again by this delay.

In office, the Labour Government introduced the victims code, setting out for the first time the rights of victims within our criminal justice system. It is now time to provide that code with legal teeth. Labour is fully committed to introducing a stand-alone victims' law that would put the key elements of the victims code into primary legislation. Will the Minister confirm the Government's intentions? Are they still committed to introducing a stand-alone piece of legislation—a victims' law? Without power to enforce the victims code in law, it is left to the police, prosecutors, courts, and parole boards to monitor how well they comply with the code.

The Government do not collect data on the experiences of victims in the criminal justice system, or on how the code is being implemented. Last month I asked the Minister how many breaches of the victims code there had been in the last four years, and I was told that that is not monitored. I asked how long it takes for victims to receive the compensation they have been awarded—Victim Support estimates that some £17.5 million in compensation was not paid within one year of a compensation order being made—and again I was told that the Government do not monitor that. I asked how many victims of domestic violence have been cross-examined in court by the perpetrator, and again the Minister responded that the Government do not hold such information. Ministers say that victims' rights are a priority for them, but how can that be if the Government do not even know whether the victims code is being enforced?

Victim Support can provide some of the answers. It surveyed almost 400 victims and found that asking the criminal justice system to mark its own homework when upholding the victims code leads to victims being let down at each stage of the process. The research found that six in 10 victims surveyed did not receive their rights under the code. Does the Minister agree that it is time that that was effectively monitored and upheld? We cannot simply rely on victims being aware of their

rights under the code. Does the Minister agree with the Victims' Commissioner, Baroness Newlove, who recently said:

"Why should victims always have to be fighting their corner? That's why we need a victims' law."?

Time and time again victims speak of the importance of having their voice heard in the process, being able to address the court directly and to contribute to parole board decisions, but fewer than half of all eligible victims have opted in to the victim contact scheme that ensures that victims are kept up to date on their case and allows them to make statements before sentencing and parole. Presumably, many victims do not even know that such a scheme exists. More than half of victims surveyed by Victim Support were not offered the chance to make a victim personal statement.

The failure to inform the victims of John Worboys about the decision to release him on parole is the most recent and serious example of the way that victims' views are neglected and ignored by our criminal justice system. It took a public outcry and the tenacity of the victims themselves to ensure that they were contacted for consultation on the terms of his release.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. I ask the hon. Lady to be mindful that this is sub judice and any comments she may make must be carefully considered.

Gloria De Piero: Thank you, Mrs Main; I will do that.

Another key pillar of the victims code is the right to review a decision by the police or Crown Prosecution Service, such as a decision not to prosecute. I asked the Government what proportion of qualifying victims go as far as requesting a review of a decision, and I was told it happens in less than 2% of cases. Either 98% of victims are happy with decisions taken by police and prosecutors, or they are simply unaware of or unable to access that right. Last year the Government blocked Labour attempts to enshrine the right to a review in law, and to make it legally enforceable and monitored. Will the Minister confirm whether the long-awaited victims strategy will seek finally to place that right in law?

This issue does not matter only for victims. The experience of reporting a crime and going through the court process is actively deterring many people from coming forward or pursuing their case, and that is particularly serious for victims of sexual assault and domestic violence. Victims of sexual or domestic violence still lack the confidence to report an attack. They fear the ordeal that they might face in the courtroom, including coming face to face with their abuser and being forced to relive every detail of the ordeal in front of the courts, often cross-examined as if they were the one on trial. We therefore welcome the recent announcement of a consultation on the draft Domestic Abuse Bill and the Government's consideration of extending to victims of domestic abuse special provisions, such as separate entrances and exits, screens and video links, which are currently available to victims of sexual violence. It is critical, however, that that is not only for the criminal courts; they must also be available in the family courts.

Last year, we uncovered figures showing that, since the Government's cuts to legal aid, the number of victims of domestic violence representing themselves against their abusers in the family courts has more than doubled. Victims are facing the prospect not only of

having to represent themselves, but of being cross-examined by their abuser in court. Women's Aid has found that more than half of the domestic abuse victims it surveyed had no access to special measures and more than a third were verbally or physically abused by their former partner in the family courts. Will the Minister confirm that the Government's plans to extend special court provisions to victims of domestic abuse will extend to the family courts as well?

I will end with a quote from Claire Waxman, the new London Victims' Commissioner appointed by London Mayor Sadiq Khan. She summed up her own experience of the criminal justice system, saying:

"I naively believed the system was there to help victims, instead it compounds their trauma. It placed the rights of my stalker above my rights to be protected".

Such stories are all too familiar. It is time that the Government fulfilled their promise and gave us a victims' law.

3.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. It has been a pleasure to hear all the contributions this afternoon, especially that of my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan). I hope I can go some way to answer all the questions, including the battery of questions that the shadow Minister just posed. If I do not answer the questions appropriately, hon. Members will get correspondence following the debate.

I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) for securing this debate on the rights of victims of crime. It is particularly timely given the recent focus on such matters in a number of high-profile cases. I know through my own personal experience of meeting victims of crime, speaking with support organisations and meeting many of the hon. Members present, exactly how important such rights are in the lives of victims. I am therefore grateful for the opportunity to discuss them with you today.

Victims' rights are now a fundamental part of our justice system, and ensuring that victims receive the rights they are entitled to is a priority for this Government. That is essential if we are to enable victims to cope with and recover from crime. We must also continue to drive improvement in the broader experience of victims, which involves ensuring that criminal justice agencies provide victims with a service appropriate to their needs and respectful of them as individuals. That also requires focus on the wider performance of agencies. Victims want cases to be well managed and dealt with swiftly. Beyond the criminal justice agencies, it is important that victim support services are in a position to offer victims the sorts of support they may need to aid their long-term recovery.

Turning to the current framework of victims' rights, we look first to the statutory victims code, which does two fundamentally important things. First, it sets out for victims exactly what they are entitled to receive from the criminal justice system. Secondly, it makes clear to the criminal justice agencies the services that they are expected to provide.

The Government want to make sure that the entitlements in the code keep pace with the changing needs of victims. After publicly consulting on the proposed changes,

we revised the victims code in 2015. The revised code transposes part of the EU victims directive, which lays down the minimum standards of support that member states must provide to victims of crime.

The 2015 revision of the code broadened the definition of a victim so that victims of all criminal offences are entitled to receive support and information under the code. It also required relevant agencies outside the core criminal justice system that provide services to victims of crime to apply the victims code. Most crimes are dealt with by the police and Crown Prosecution Service, but there are other organisations with powers to investigate and prosecute. Finally, the revision entitled all victims who report a crime to receive a written acknowledgment, stating the basic elements of the criminal offence concerned.

As important as the code is, it will only deliver for victims if criminal justice agencies give effect to it on the ground. Victims' rights must be a practical reality within the justice system, rather than just words on a page. This Government are committed to ensuring that the rights of victims are delivered throughout the criminal justice process. We have done that by improving the practical support on offer for vulnerable and intimidated victims of crime, such as protective screens in court and a video link, to ensure they are able to give their best evidence and to reduce the anxiety caused. We want to help victims provide evidence in a way that will prevent retraumatisation.

We are also determined to make the process of attending court less daunting for victims. We have established model waiting rooms at five sites in England and Wales, and are using them, and the results of a detailed audit of facilities for victims in all criminal courts, to provide the template for nationwide improvements.

More widely, we have radically transformed the way support services are delivered to victims to ensure that they reflect the needs of victims in local areas. Following consultation, the Government empowered police and crime commissioners to deliver services tailored to the needs of victims in their areas. We are allocating about £68 million to police and crime commissioners this year to provide emotional and practical support services for victims of crime.

Our enduring commitment to victims has seen the wider victim support services budget increase significantly, from around £50 million in 2012-13 to around £96 million in the current financial year. The direct benefit to victims of our support can be seen in the services now available for victims of sexual violence. Since 2010, central Government funding has enabled 15 new rape support centres to open. There are now 89 centres that the Government support directly. The centres provide counselling, support and advocacy to help victims—men and women, boys and girls—recover, as far as possible, from the effect of those terrible crimes. As part of the violence against women and girls 2020 strategy, we have made a commitment to maintain funding for rape support services at 2016-17 levels for the remainder of the spending review period.

We also know that when someone is the victim of, or bereaved by, the most traumatic crimes, they will need support from enhanced services. This year, we are providing just over £3 million to support families bereaved by murder or manslaughter. The Government have also provided specific funding to meet the needs of the victims of large-scale crimes, as we did following last year's appalling attacks in Manchester and London.

[*Dr Phillip Lee*]

Victims also have the right to apply for compensation under the criminal injuries compensation scheme if they are victims of violent crime. I sympathise deeply with anyone who has been caused injury by such a crime and we are determined to make sure that every victim gets the compensation to which they are entitled. To that end, in 2016-17, the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority, which administers the scheme independently of Government, paid out around £143 million in compensation to victims of violent crime.

Despite all that has been achieved in recent years, we must never stop endeavouring to deliver support to victims more effectively. The challenge is ongoing—the needs of victims change over time, and crime itself evolves. As well as considering the development of victims' entitlements, we need to ensure that agencies deliver those entitlements that are already in place. That is why we are exploring ways to strengthen victims' rights through the victims strategy, which we will publish by the summer of 2018. It will consider how compliance with the entitlements in the victims code might be improved and better monitored.

We are also examining how criminal justice agencies responsible for delivery of entitlements might be better held to account. We are currently considering the legislative and non-legislative routes to delivering effective compliance for victims, and we are engaging widely as we develop the strategy, to make certain that the needs of victims are properly considered. As part of that work, we are exploring how victim support services can better reflect the changing nature of crime. Although the crime survey of England and Wales shows considerable falls in overall estimated crime, police recorded crime for violence against the person offences has increased 20%. For sexual offences, it has increased by 23%. Those figures give a valuable insight into the changing case load of the police. It is important that the services we provide reflect those changes, in order that the police are best able to help victims to cope and recover. We must keep the whole criminal justice process in mind, end to end. The issues raised in the Worboys case highlight that point. In the light of those issues, the Justice Secretary has ordered a review of parole processes, transparency and engagement with victims. A crucial part of that involves considering how we can better support and empower victims going through parole processes. We will bring forward proposals in that area shortly.

We are also looking to address the needs of victims who have to engage with other parts of the justice system. We accept that the family and civil courts can learn valuable lessons from the progress that has been made in criminal justice. We are working closely with senior judges and relevant agencies to consider how best to improve support and protections in other parts of the system. As recently as November 2017, new court rules were introduced requiring family courts to consider whether someone involved in proceedings is vulnerable, and if so, take steps to enable them to participate or give evidence.

Just last week, on International Women's Day, the Government launched a consultation on domestic abuse. We want to hear people's experiences to ensure that the system reflects victims' needs. We hope to hear from a wide range of stakeholders, including survivors of domestic abuse and the organisations that support them. The

consultation will shape our response to this terrible crime, which affects some 2 million victims each year. In addition to introducing a domestic violence and abuse Bill, we want to ensure a comprehensive response that not only involves all parts of Government, but builds on charities' expertise. That is one reason why we have committed to invest a further £20 million in frontline groups.

We heard from a number of colleagues this afternoon, including my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friend the Member for Telford, the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), and the Opposition spokespeople, the hon. Members for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero). There were also interventions from my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) and the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq).

The hon. Member for Leeds North West mentioned the victims of terrorism. The unit sits with the Home Office, but the funding sits with us—the complexity of the Government is always somewhat beyond me. The Government are committed to ensuring that victims of recent terrorist attacks receive the help and support they need. This year, we are providing £3.1 million for the homicide service, which supports those bereaved by murder or manslaughter, including terrorist attacks.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay mentioned restorative justice, in which I am a strong believer. One of the reasons I am going to Brighton on Thursday afternoon is to support the work of the Restorative Justice Council. He also mentioned domestic abuse. As I said, dealing with domestic abuse is a key priority for the Government. I am very pleased about that and am proud to be playing my small part in it, not least because I have had a number of patients in the past who suffered from that dreadful crime.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle talked about victims of antisocial behaviour. I suspect that that issue blights every single constituency in the country. She also mentioned some awful cases of hate crime. I share her abhorrence of such crimes.

I am flattered that the Chair of the Justice Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, has joined us. He always makes fantastic contributions based on his deep knowledge of the area. He mentioned a series of issues—in particular the registered intermediaries scheme, which actually sits with the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer). It is a vital part of supporting vulnerable victims and witnesses when they give evidence. We are currently recruiting more intermediaries, improving the training available to them and working closely with the police and prosecutors to ensure that witnesses are matched to an intermediary as swiftly as possible.

My hon. Friend also spoke about courts. He is aware of section 28 and our pre-trial evidence measures for vulnerable victims who do not want to go through the court process. He also mentioned restorative justice and

the need for a victims' law. I hope I have assured him and others, including the hon. Member for Ashfield, about the victims' law. There is no backtracking from our commitment. My understanding is that we will have some form of legislative underpinning of the victims code. The detail is yet to be fully worked through, but it will be in the strategy that will be published by the summer.

The hon. Member for Strangford spoke passionately—particularly about victims of terrorism. He always speaks well in such debates, sadly drawing on his recent experience of the troubles. He should be listened to carefully.

My hon. Friend the Member for Telford made a memorable speech. I think child sexual abuse is the worst of all crimes. Her sterling work and her obvious passion in that area is to be commended. In my nine-year tenure in university, one of my theses—I think it was in about 1992—was on the psychology of the child sex offender. I remember that in 1992 I was sceptical about the academic literature's claims about the incidence of physical, emotional and sexual abuse of children in our society. Sadly, it turned out to be more accurate than I could ever have imagined. The independent inquiry on child sex abuse is now encountering the scale of the problem. The Government recognise that the inquiry is going to take a long time. If there are incidents where we can intervene to try to prevent sexual exploitation, we should. It is notable that two women made speeches on that issue, and the hon. Member for Rotherham made an intervention. Having strong women in this space is a good thing. We must empower women in the communities where sexual exploitation is taking place. If those women see strong women in action, they will step forward and offer the leadership that is desperately required.

The hon. Member for Rochdale is well-known to have deep experience of criminal justice, and I respect him for that. He mentioned restorative justice. I agree with him about the importance of high-quality training, which is why I am supporting the Restorative Justice Council's work as much as possible. He mentioned the failure of prosecution, which sits outside my brief, but his comments were well made.

Finally—I have managed to get to the end in the required time—I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North West for organising the debate and all hon. Members for their outstanding contributions. I hope we can work across the House and beyond as we continue our efforts to support the victims of crime.

3.57 pm

Alex Sobel: I thank all hon. Members who took part in the debate. There were many notable contributions. The hon. Members for Torbay (Kevin Foster) and for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), and my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) all spoke about restorative justice. I thank the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst for asking for a statutory right to access restorative justice. That is hugely important, and I fully support that call. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) supported my call for a new victims' law. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) asked for statutory youth provision. My hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) supported that proposal and is leading the fight for it.

I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan), who raised the issue of child sexual exploitation. She bravely raised publicly the particular issues in Telford. I support her call for an independent investigation inquiry into Telford. She is surely on the side of the righteous in taking that issue forward. The shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), made some excellent points.

The need for a victims' law is irrefutable. I was disappointed by the Minister's response. He talked about physical measures, such as protective screens and video links, and £68 million of additional funding. They are welcome but not sufficient. We continually talk about a victims' law but do not enact it, although it has been in two manifestos and the Queen's Speech. Now is the time to move forward and set out the legislative underpinning we need for a victims' law.

I was disappointed that the Minister did not seem to listen to the issues I raised about my constituent who, nine months since the Manchester bombing, still has not had support. The Minister suggested that that was perhaps partly due to the fact that the issue fell between the stools of two Departments. I hope those Departments get together to ensure that victims are supported.

Dr Lee: I will by all means write to the hon. Gentleman on that issue. I will be very happy to provide a response.

Alex Sobel: I thank the Minister. I surely will write to him on behalf of my constituent.

Let us move forward. Let us work together to try to get a victims' law on the statute book.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the rights of victims of crime.

British Nationals Imprisoned Abroad

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered British nationals imprisoned abroad.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. In late January, I attended an event organised by the Redress Trust, the international human rights and anti-torture non-governmental organisation, and the all-party parliamentary human rights group to launch Redress's new report, "Beyond Discretion: The Protection of British Nationals Abroad". The report uses the NGO's experience of working with British torture survivors and their families over the past 25 years when trying to get the help of the UK Government.

Under international law, through the Vienna convention on consular relations, to which the UK is a party, all states have a right to intervene on behalf of nationals abroad to ensure that their fundamental rights are respected. It is important to recognise that that is not the same as interfering in cases. Among other protections, the VCCR allows for the freedom of communication between consular officials and a detained person, as well as freedom of access to the detained through consular visits.

Every year, nearly 6,000 British nationals are arrested or detained abroad. Of those, more than 100 tell the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that they have been tortured or ill treated while abroad. In 2016, the latest year for which data is available, the FCO delivered assistance to 118 British nationals who alleged that they had been tortured. The total number who have been tortured is of course likely to be higher, as some might not be able to report such violations, or have the chance to. One such case is that of Jagtar Singh Johal.

In October 2017, Jagtar travelled to India to marry his fiancée. On 4 November, while out shopping, he was seized by plain-clothes officers, hooded and abducted. Following a brief court hearing, he was held incommunicado by Indian police for nine days at an undisclosed location, and he was denied all access to lawyers, British consular staff and family members. On 10 November, Jagtar was secretly presented in court while his lawyer and British consular staff were, outrageously, left outside the courtroom waiting to be called. They were informed along with the media only after he had been presented before the court and had left the courtroom. Subsequently, witnesses reported that Jagtar had great difficulty standing or walking and had to be assisted by the police officers escorting him in and out of the courtroom, supporting Jagtar's claim of severe torture.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for bringing this short debate to the House. Is not the forthcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting here in London a prime opportunity for the Government to tackle the Indian Government head-on about the claims of torture of my constituent, Jagtar Singh Johal, while he was in early detention in India?

Preet Kaur Gill: Absolutely. That is a question I shall be posing to the Minister in my speech.

On 14 November, in the courtroom when Jagtar first met his lawyer, briefly, he made allegations of severe torture between 5 and 9 November. That included leg separation and electric shocks to his ears, nipples and genitals. He has told lawyers that police also forced him to sign blank pieces of paper, believed to be for the purpose of forging confessions.

On 16 November, after much lobbying, British consular staff were eventually able to meet Jagtar, some 12 days after his abduction, torture and interrogation, but two senior police officers remained in the interrogation room to prevent a private conversation. The experienced consular officer present assessed Jagtar and concluded that he was prevented from fully opening up about his mistreatment or to show signs of torture, and he was declared vulnerable. To date, unacceptably, the Indian authorities have prevented Jagtar from having private access to British consular staff. Will the Minister please offer some explanation as to why the Indian authorities have done that? What actions has the FCO taken in the past 130 days to address such an unacceptable state of affairs?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this matter to Westminster Hall for consideration. I have been asked by the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) to intervene on behalf of her constituent, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who has been imprisoned in Iran for almost two years. We all know the story, which is clear, and she has been separated from her husband Richard, who lives in West Hampstead, and her daughter Gabriella, who lives with Nazanin's parents in Tehran. That case should never be forgotten. It is important to renew our efforts to free her and bring her home—and to bring all the other people home as well.

Preet Kaur Gill: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention on behalf of Nazanin, whose case has been in the public arena for some time. Her husband is present in the Public Gallery for this debate. I shall also touch on her case, which is also extremely important.

On 21 November, in response to a parliamentary question by the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), the then FCO Minister, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), described Jagtar's treatment as "unconstitutional" and warned of "extreme action" against the Indian authorities. For a large part of his detention, Jagtar has been in police as opposed to judicial custody. In police custody, apart from the severe-degree torture, he has been abused and mistreated. Sleep deprivation techniques, constant verbal abuse, solitary confinement, use of handcuffs 24 hours a day, and misinformation about his family and the British authorities have been used to exploit and demoralise Jagtar mentally.

In December 2017, Redress called on the UN special rapporteur on torture to intervene in Jagtar's case, and on the Indian Government to ensure that he is protected from further torture. Redress also called for Jagtar to be provided with an immediate independent medical examination—which he has been denied, despite repeated requests by his lawyer—and for the allegations of torture to be investigated according to international law. The next hearing for such a medical will be held sometime in

March, almost four months after the alleged torture took place. Again, will the Minister please update us on the steps taken to secure an independent medical examination and any necessary medical treatment following the allegations of torture?

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I think the hon. Lady touched on this briefly, and might be about to do so in more detail, but does she agree with me and with Redress that if the Government provided a higher level of consular assistance, as well as some consistency and clarity about the circumstances in which they will provide it, that would help in the cases not only of those such as Nazanin and Jagtar, but those seriously injured abroad, which is another significant issue? For example, my constituent Robbie Hughes suffered a serious attack while abroad.

Preet Kaur Gill: We are signed up to the VCCR so, as the right hon. Gentleman was absolutely correct to say, we need to ensure that we use our position in the light of that to raise similar issues for injured individuals.

Jagtar's case is extremely serious, but it has become farcical and a trial by media. He has been brought to court more than 30 times over the past four months, and he has been taken in and out of judicial and police custody. He is now being held in judicial custody until 3 April. I understand that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has expressed concerns in writing that confidential police investigation videos of Jagtar, taken when he was under duress, have inappropriately been released to Indian TV stations by the Indian authorities. Has the Foreign and Commonwealth Office complained to the Indian authorities about Jagtar facing trial by media, which means that, if charged, he would never get a fair trial?

The British High Commission has never been able to meet Jagtar in private. Requests for private access to him have been repeatedly denied. I will go into more detail about the importance of private visits by consular officials in cases such as Jagtar's. The VCCR states that nationals should be "free to communicate" and have access to consular officers. In cases of torture, often the authorities will be present in the room or will find other ways of monitoring and controlling interactions between consular officers and the individual. The International Committee of the Red Cross, which conducts prison visits throughout the world to ensure humane treatment, recognises that private interviews are the only way to make it possible to hear an individual's point of view. In addition, the United Nations Committee Against Torture has called on states to

"insist on unrestricted consular access to its nationals who are in detention abroad, with facility for unmonitored meetings and, if required...appropriate medical expertise".

In short, private visits are essential to ensure the safety of victims of torture.

Consular assistance is an important humanitarian safeguard and provides a crucial link with the outside world. Sometimes it is the only link. The UK has said that it is a priority to meet Jagtar in private, but it is unacceptable that after 130 days it has not been able to do so. As I conclude my remarks about Jagtar, I ask the Minister whether the Foreign Secretary will meet Jagtar's family, who are concerned about the priority being given to this case.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to ask that the Foreign Secretary meet the family. I have had many constituents contact me about this case. They are deeply concerned, because many of them visit India and they want to make sure that the proper protections are available. It would be appropriate for the Government to give higher priority to this case.

Preet Kaur Gill: As my hon. Friend suggests, lots of individuals have approached many Members, from all parts of the House, stating that they are very concerned about visiting India, given what has happened in Jagtar Singh Johal's case. I therefore ask the Minister whether the Prime Minister will raise Jagtar's case with Narendra Modi when she meets him next month in London, given that she spoke to the BBC and showed interest in Jagtar's case within days of his abduction and torture.

On a broader level, I would like the Minister to give an update on the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. Once again, Nazanin has had no access to consular services. She was placed in solitary confinement for eight and a half months in a cell measuring just 1.5 by 2 square metres and has been subjected to maximum psychological pressure, with the intention of demoralising her and putting her in a completely powerless situation. She has faced prosecution for the charges levelled against her in a secret and unfair trial. Her treatment has had a severe impact on her mental and physical health. As hopes for her release were dashed over Christmas, what action are the UK Government taking to ensure that she is protected from any further torture and ill treatment, and that she is released as soon as possible?

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. On the point about Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, does she agree that we need to review the support given to dual nationals to ensure that we offer them protection when travelling to hostile states?

Preet Kaur Gill: My hon. Friend raises a very important point about dual nationals and making sure that they have the rights they are entitled to. In Nazanin's case, she should have had access to British consular services.

Finally, I would like to raise the case of Andy Tsege, a British national who has been arbitrarily detained in Ethiopia since 2014, when he was kidnapped and rendered to Ethiopia on the command of the Ethiopian Government, as part of a brutal crackdown on political opponents and civil rights activists. After being kidnapped, Andy was held in secret detention in solitary confinement for more than a year. He has been paraded on Ethiopian TV looking ill and gaunt. Andy is held under a sentence of death that was handed down in absentia while he was living in London, in a trial that was lacking basic elements of due process. He has no contact with his family in London, despite promises from the Foreign Secretary over a year ago to facilitate a family visit, and he is not receiving appropriate medical care.

These three individuals represent just a fraction of the number of British nationals imprisoned abroad. Although I do not call for the Government of this country to interfere in the internal affairs of another sovereign state, or proclaim that due process should not be followed, we cannot sit idly by while British citizens are deprived of some of the most basic rights that we

[Preet Kaur Gill]

hold dear. An integral part of being a responsible member of the global community is to conduct oneself in accordance with international rules and norms, none more so than the 1948 universal declaration of human rights, which states that human rights should be protected by the rule of law. The Government are obliged to ensure that all British citizens are subject to this protection, and I call on them to use every legitimate means to ensure that no British citizen should have to suffer such unlawful and inhumane treatment.

4.13 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) for securing this very important debate.

According to data released by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, more than 5,000 British nationals were detained overseas in 2016. However, keeping in mind the time constraints, I will be unable to talk about cases such as the very high-profile case of Mrs Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. I note that Mr Ratcliffe and his mother are present in the Public Gallery as part of their long-standing fight for justice. Instead, I will focus on the case of Mr Jagtar Singh Johal, a British resident of Dunbartonshire who was arrested in November 2017 while on holiday in the Punjab in India, and who has been imprisoned since then without any charge. As we have heard today, Mr Johal has undergone experiences that gravely concern many colleagues in this House; that is proved by the number of Members of Parliament from all parties who are in attendance.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman speaks of the concerns that we all have about Jagtar Singh Johal; I have had 68 emails from constituents—I have three gurdwaras in my constituency—and there is wider concern among people who wish to travel to India about how they will be treated when they go.

Mr Dhesi: Precisely; like the hon. Lady, I have had various—to put it mildly—contacts from constituents and further afield. It is incumbent on us all to stand for the human rights of all British citizens. That is why we are taking part in this debate.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. If a Member wishes to speak in a half-hour debate, it is the convention of the House that they must have the permission of the Minister who is responding. I am advised that that permission has not been given. There may have been some confusion in this process. I encourage the Member to shorten his remarks, because I am aware that the Minister has a detailed reply to give to the House.

Mr Dhesi: I thank you, Mr Hollobone, for your clarification. However, I would like to point out that I contacted the relevant individuals of the House authorities to make sure that I had permission to speak. I thank the Minister for allowing me to speak.

It is important that the British Parliament should defend the rights of all our fellow citizens, wherever they are in the world, to have the benefit of due process under law, whatever they might be suspected or accused of. This is particularly true where allegations of torture have been made by the detainee.

Mr Johal's legal representative called for an independent medical report to ascertain his client's claims of torture, but that request has been denied. Although consular services have been provided to Mr Johal by the British Deputy High Commissioner in Chandigarh, allegedly all visits have been supervised by the Indian prison authorities and none has been held in private. That example highlights the continued failures by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in handling Mr Johal's case and raising the important issues of his welfare with the relevant authorities. The UK Government's failure to condemn the series of abuses has left all British citizens travelling abroad vulnerable. I implore the Minister to act now and press for further access to Mr Johal so he can receive the necessary support that he is entitled to as a British citizen.

4.17 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) on securing this important debate, ably supported by the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi). The Minister for Africa, my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), had hoped to take part in this debate as she is the Minister with departmental responsibility for this area, but at this very moment she is appearing before the Foreign Affairs Committee. It is therefore my pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government.

I will set out some general consular policy before moving on to the detention policy and the individual cases raised. I also undertake to write to hon. Members with more details where that is appropriate. The Government are proud to uphold a long tradition of offering British nationals a comprehensive, responsive consular service. Consular assistance is central to our work at the FCO. This support is not a right, I hasten to add, nor is it an obligation. Contrary to a common misconception, the Government do not have a legal duty of care to British nationals abroad. When things go wrong, our consular staff endeavour to give advice and practical support to British nationals overseas and their families in the UK, 24 hours a day, seven days a week and 365 days a year. We aim to provide support and guidance tailored to the specific context of each case. As would be expected, our staff provide professional, non-judgmental, polite and helpful support where possible.

The volume, variety and complexity of the cases we deal with is staggering. In the last financial year alone our staff overseas dealt with approximately 5,000 detentions, 3,600 deaths and nearly 3,500 hospital cases. Naturally, our support is not without certain reasonable limitations. Rightly, the FCO expects and advises individuals to take sensible steps before they travel.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mark Field: I will not, because I have very little time to make the speech I want to make.

UK nationals travelling abroad should ensure that they have sufficient travel insurance and read the FCO's travel advice so that they can make informed decisions about the obvious risks in certain parts of the world. We offer help appropriate to the circumstances of each case. Our overseas staff assess individuals' vulnerability and needs based on who they are, where they are and

the situation they face. Dual nationality was mentioned; I will endeavour to ensure that there is a review of precisely what impact that has and revert to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston.

We work particularly hard to support those who are most in need of our help, and we intervene on behalf of families if British nationals are not treated in line with internationally accepted standards or there are unreasonable delays in procedures compared with the way nationals of the country concerned are treated. We are not, however, in a position to take decisions on people's behalf, nor are we able to do everything that might be asked of us. As a matter of policy, we do not pay outstanding bills, including legal fees, as we are not funded to provide such financial assistance, nor does the FCO seek preferential treatment for British nationals. That means we do not and must not interfere in civil or criminal court proceedings, as was pointed out. It is right that we respect the legal systems of other countries, just as we expect foreign nationals to respect our laws and legal processes when they are here in the UK.

We have a clear policy that dictates how we engage in detention cases. We typically become aware of such cases when the British national involved agrees that the host Government may notify us of their detention. We then make contact or visit, where possible, within 24 hours. That did happen in the Johal case: as was alluded to, there was simply a delay in British authorities' being made aware of his detention.

There are some 2,000 Britons in detention at any one time, the greatest number—approximately 400—in the United States of America. Our priority is always the welfare of UK nationals: to ensure that they receive food, water and medical treatment as required, and that they have access to legal advice. I know personally from dealing with the notorious cases of the Chennai Six and the group that was recently detained in Cambodia just how important that is.

The number of consular visits depends on the context of a particular case. Some have described those visits as a lifeline, and they may be the only visits a British national in detention abroad receives. Our assistance does not stop there. If a British national tells us they have been mistreated or tortured, our consular staff will, with their permission, do their best to raise concerns with the authorities and seek an investigation. To strengthen our support, we often work with partner organisations, of which the charity Prisoners Abroad is one example. Prisoners Abroad supports detainees and their families and helps to facilitate contact. If there is no family, it can help find detainees a pen-pal or send them books to read or study. It can also help with prisoners' resettlement in the UK after release.

The death penalty exacerbates the anxiety for all those involved in consular cases where a British national is at risk of receiving or is in receipt of a capital sentence. Working to abolish the death penalty remains a key priority of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. It is an important part of our day-to-day work and that of all our diplomatic missions in countries that still carry out the death penalty. Our message to them is clear: we believe the death penalty to be unjust, outdated and ineffective, and it risks fuelling extremism. There are currently 15 British nationals on death row around the world. Irrespective of the reason for their conviction, we do all we can to ensure that the death penalty is

commuted and is not carried out. As with all countries that retain the death penalty, we hope that the Government of India establish a moratorium on executions, in line with the global trend towards the abolition of capital punishment.

Let me turn to some of the specifics of Mr Johal's case. Only this morning, his tenacious and hard-working constituency MP, the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), who is here, was able to speak to our high commissioner in India, Sir Dominic Asquith. I was asked directly why consular officials have not been given private consular access. That is a matter of great frustration. We frequently requested private consular access when Mr Johal was first detained, but as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston will know, he has since been moved to the Nabha prison—a maximum security jail where, for security reasons, private visits are not permitted. I will write to Members who raised the issue of CHOGM, particularly the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Our understanding is that the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, will come to that conference. Will the Prime Minister raise this issue directly with him, and will the Foreign Secretary raise it with his counterpart from India?

Mark Field: I will try to ensure that that is done. The right hon. Gentleman will be well aware that these things rightly often have to be done on a private basis rather than through megaphone diplomacy.

Mr Johal's case is well known to me and to senior colleagues in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Our staff have been working hard to provide assistance to Mr Johal and his family in the UK ever since his arrest in India in November 2017. I have met Mr Johal's brother twice in the past six months, along with the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire. Since Mr Johal's arrest, consular staff have visited him fortnightly. The Foreign Secretary spoke to his Indian counterpart about his case in November, and I raised it with the Indian Minister of State for Home Affairs on 11 January. Furthermore, various officials in our high commission have continued to raise concerns at the highest level. As Members pointed out, there are major concerns. Our high commissioner spoke to the Indian Foreign Secretary as recently as 7 March, and the basis of that conversation was relayed to the hon. Gentleman this morning.

I assure the House that we shall continue to raise this case at senior levels with the Indian authorities until the serious allegations raised by Mr Johal have been properly investigated. I recognise that this is a desperately difficult and distressing time for Mr Johal, his family and many in the UK Sikh community. I assure all hon. Members that his case remains a priority for me personally, and we shall continue to raise it with the Indian authorities as necessary.

Let me touch briefly on the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. I recognise that her husband is here today. We shall continue to approach that case in the way that we judge is most likely to secure the outcome that we all want—in other words, her release. I hope the House will understand that I am not in a position to provide a running commentary on each and every development in Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe's case, save that I believe there needs to be a review of what happens in relation to dual

[Mark Field]

nationals. I am not convinced that anything untoward necessarily happened here, but we need to try to review that issue.

I am unaware of the facts of the case of Mr Tsege, the British national in an Ethiopian jail to whom the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston referred, so I hope she will forgive me if I say I will write to her with full details of the issues she raised.

Understandably, much of this debate has related to Mr Johal. It is important to put on the record that India, as a partner in the Commonwealth and in many other ways, has a strong democratic framework that is designed to guarantee human rights. However, it also faces numerous challenges relating to its size and development, and when it comes to enforcing fundamental rights enshrined in its constitution and wider law, not least given the power of its states. Members are absolutely right to raise concerns about human rights in India in this forum and, as I said, I am happy for them to do so via correspondence. Because we share those real concerns, the UK Government are working alongside the Indian Government to build capacity and share expertise on the promotion and protection of human rights. I hope Members will understand that that is sometimes best done quietly and privately rather than through public pronouncements.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston once again for her contribution.

Graham P. Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Field: No.

I take this opportunity to thank the families and friends of British nationals detained overseas for working with us to support their loved ones through the most distressing situations. I also thank our consular officers, who at times work under great stress, for the support they provide British nationals during their most difficult times. The support by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for British nationals in difficulty abroad is and will continue to be an absolute priority.

Question put and agreed to.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Would those who are not staying for the next debate, which is an important debate about the contribution to society of social workers, please be kind enough to leave the Chamber quickly, quietly and without conversation?

Social Workers

4.29 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the contribution to society of social workers.

It is an honour to serve under you, Mr Hollobone, and a real pleasure for me to call this debate in Westminster Hall. I would like to record for *Hansard* that the room is heaving and that the Public Gallery is packed, with standing room only. Alas, I cannot, because there is an important debate on statutory instruments on the Floor of the House. A number of colleagues from both sides of the House would have wanted to be here, were that not happening.

This subject has been close to my heart for the better part of a decade. I came across the extraordinary work that social workers do on first coming to work in Parliament, about a decade ago. I confess that until then I had been largely sheltered from the world in which they work, and indeed from the people they help. In the intervening 10 years I have never ceased to be amazed by their extraordinary passion, professionalism, stamina and commitment to helping people in some of the most difficult situations in which any citizens in our country find themselves. In the words of one social worker I was speaking to the other day, it is “a bloody hard job, but it’s bloody rewarding.”

I have been lucky in my career because I have had the opportunity to visit about 50 local authorities in the past 10 years, and everywhere I have gone I have seen great innovation and determination to help improve the lives of the most unfortunate.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I have dealt with social workers for a number of years and I agree that often they are undervalued and that when something goes wrong, they carry the blame. We often wonder why they do it, given the circumstances they find themselves in, with particularly difficult families, to say the least. They also see many things such as child abuse and pensioner abuse, for which they are on the frontline. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that society should do more to show that we value their contribution?

Alex Burghart: I completely agree; the hon. Gentleman makes his point powerfully. I have come to see social workers as the fifth emergency service, although I got in trouble for saying that many years ago—I got an angry letter from the coastguard—so I have ceased to say that. Social workers are one of our emergency services, but unlike the others, the majority of people never come into contact with them, and most people do not even know someone who has. It is therefore easy for misconceptions to grow about their role in society, the job they do and the way in which they do it. Part of the importance of this debate is to recognise the true nature of their job.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I know he has a deep interest in and a real passion for social work, and children’s services in particular. Has he seen Unison’s briefing for the debate? It tells us that half of social workers feel that their case load is over the limit, and

they blame staff shortages for that. Also, 60% say that Government cuts affect their ability to best support vulnerable people, and most work for free for 10 hours a week. Does he agree not only that we need to train and recruit more social workers into the system, but that we need the cash to support and pay them, and that we should reward them individually with a good pay rise?

Alex Burghart: I was grateful to Unison and the British Association of Social Workers for the briefings they sent me in advance of the debate. I understand that the survey reported in the Unison briefing represents some challenges for the profession and its working environment. I will always be found looking to Government to provide more resources for vulnerable people. I would say on behalf of the Government—although I am sure the Minister can defend the Government perfectly well without me—that, according to the Library, since 2014-15 the money that has gone into children's social work has gone up by 2% in real terms. We can always look for more, but I am glad that it is moving in the right direction.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I had not intended to be here but I found myself with a little extra time, so I am glad to contribute. As he rightly said, many people do not come into contact with social workers, but I grew up with a mother who was a social worker in Muirhouse in Edinburgh—some may know it as the area on which the film “Trainspotting” was based—during the heroin explosion and HIV crisis in the '80s. She went on to be a social work manager and lecture at university. So, I grew up with a great sense of social justice and the very difficult but ultimately rewarding job that social workers do. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should have a national day to recognise social workers—unless we already have one that I am not aware of?

Alex Burghart: I think for the people in this room, every day is national social worker day. I am sure we celebrate the work they do in our daily lives and in our jobs.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): On that point, I do not think we have a social worker day, but, as patron of the Social Worker of the Year awards, I inform the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) that this coming Thursday there will be a reception on the Terrace for all the winners, and she is more than welcome to come along, meet them and pay her tribute in person.

Alex Burghart: Unbeknown to us, national social worker day is later this week—what we have achieved in the debate already! Most of my remarks will be confined to children's social work as it is the area that I know best. That is in no way to denigrate the extraordinary work that adult social workers do. Indeed, on Friday I was with some of the adult social workers in Essex, who were absolutely impressive in their determination to make things better for local people. They were full of new ideas—they have developed an interesting new programme to support newly qualified social workers, which had seen recruitment increase substantially—and I am pleased to know that vulnerable adults and elderly people in my constituency can rely on them.

As I said, I came to this subject relatively recently in my career, and I did so by accident. I had started out working on education, and through good fortune and strange circumstances I ended up working for my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who has graced us with his presence. That was back in 2008, and at that time social workers were in particularly difficult circumstances. Their public reputation had taken a hammering following the Victoria Climbié case and soon after I started that job the awful case of Peter Connelly—Baby P—broke in the newspapers. Very unfairly, for a while social workers alone took the blame for the mistakes made in those cases. It was symptomatic of a society and a news environment that did not understand child protection in the round and was searching for the easiest scapegoats.

By the time I joined my hon. Friend—my then boss—he had already written what turned out to be a seminal paper, called “No More Blame Game,” which sought to set aside the myths that had grown up in the public imagination and to give social workers the respect, training, resources and professional autonomy they needed to do their job properly. It was my great pleasure to work alongside him and at the Department for Education in those next few years to see that programme bear fruit. The most substantial part of it was the Munro review of child protection, which was launched in 2010 and reported in 2011. It intended to put a renewed focus on frontline social work—not on national statutory guidance or defensive systems designed to protect organisations from reputational damage, but on the frontline experience of the children being helped by a professional social work body.

Mr Jim Cunningham: One of the difficulties that social workers have is that they must deal with different agencies and sometimes get the agreement of different agencies, certainly when they are dealing with child abuse. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with that?

Alex Burghart: Very much so. Part of the work that was pioneered by a number of local authorities and pushed by central Government around 2010 was a multi-agency approach. It is now very common in local authorities to see experienced social workers in an office alongside representatives from the local police force, local mental health services and a range of local agencies, so they can have those professional conversations and should not get tied up in a bureaucratic process where people push a difficult case off their desk into somebody else's hands and hope it goes away.

Mr Jim Cunningham: The blame game.

Alex Burghart: Indeed. Instead of building a system that could, at its worst extent, be one of professional buck-passing, we have seen the development of collaborative working in the truest sense. Where that has happened, we know that vulnerable children and families are most likely to be getting the support they need.

During the course of our work in those days, we came across a number of obstinate problems that were holding professional social workers back. Anybody working in social work at the time will remember the integrated children's system, ICS, which was an extremely well-intentioned central Government computer system, designed to capture data and help social workers to analyse it.

[Alex Burghart]

The only problem was that it had not been designed in consultation with social workers; it had been designed by IT folk with other interests.

I remember—I shall never forget—sitting in an office with about 20 social workers one day and hearing with complete incredulity that it took them eight hours to fill out the form for one visit. The visit with a child and a family might have lasted 45 minutes, but it took eight hours to do the paperwork for it. The enormous burden that that placed on the social work community was incapacitating. We met social workers who were taking time off work in order to do their work. They were taking holiday so that they could get the time to fulfil their paperwork as the system required them to.

Alex Cunningham: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about the necessity of consulting with professional social workers. Another area that the National Association of Social Workers talks about is the current adoptions system and the acceleration to get children adopted as quickly as possible. The NASW has some real concerns that the system, because it is accelerated, might not be looking after the best interests of the children. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that we need to listen more to social workers, particularly their concerns about adoption and the system currently in place, so that we can ensure that children get the best outcome?

Alex Burghart: The Munro review of child protection emphasised very strongly the need for a systems learning model. That means that everyone who is involved in the child protection system and in looking after vulnerable children must be able to voice their concerns and opinions and have a fair hearing. It is only by listening to different people operating in different parts of the system that we can get the most effective working of that system. For a long time, certainly on the ground in many local authorities, social workers felt that their opinions were not being heard by senior management, that senior management—particularly some directors of children's services way back in the day—were entirely unconnected to the vulnerable population they were supposed to be serving.

We saw children's services departments that were almost solely focused on education and saw the vulnerable children as an add-on—a small part of their business. We also met directors of children's services who took the time to go out and go bowling with all their children in foster care, to hear their views. We have to remember that children themselves are part of the system, and it is through hearing their voices, and their views of the services and support they and their parents are receiving, that we can make the improvements that are so necessary.

We often talk, quite rightly, about a child-centred, or child and family-centred, system, but often, with those most vulnerable families, the only way of getting to that centre is to have professional social workers or teachers working alongside them in schools. More recently, since the Munro review reported in 2011, some fantastic additional changes have been brought in by the Department for Education.

Mr Jim Cunningham: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. We should pay a little bit of tribute to the previous Minister, Mr Timpson, the former

Member for Crewe and Nantwich, who lost his seat. About four or five years ago I did a lot of work with him, because he was looking at the issues not only at local authority but at regional level. He did a lot of good work because he understood the problem, and I was very impressed by him. We should give him a little bit of credit here.

Alex Burghart: Absolutely; Edward Timpson was an excellent Children's Minister. He had a lot of respect in the sector, and rightly so. He came from a family that had first-hand experience of fostering, and he brought a huge wealth of real-life experience to his role. It is good to hear that he was respected on both sides of the House.

One of the things brought in at DFE after 2010, as I was saying, was the innovation programme, which again gave local social workers, local authorities and people working on the ground with children and families the opportunity to come up with new ideas and bid for Government money in order to prove their model. It is good to see that fund rolling on; I think only last year the Government committed a further £36 million to the initiative, which has been warmly welcomed by local authorities and social workers across the country.

At the moment the Department is putting into practice the contents of its strategy paper, "Putting Children First"—an enormous programme of social worker development, from recruitment all the way through to ensuring that more experienced social workers are up to speed with the latest techniques and theories, and that the social work community is talking to itself and learning from itself. It is a really valuable programme, which will help to upgrade the profession in the most constructive and productive way possible.

Things are tough in some local authorities; I spend enough time talking to people in children's services to know that that is true. I also know that, even where things are financially tight, there is still great appetite for innovation and people are finding new ways of working and of helping children and families. I was talking to some social workers on Friday who had found that, simply by putting in a new package of support for newly qualified social workers, they were getting more young recruits through the door and building a vibrant, young, energetic team.

I have also been lucky enough to see how the Government's great troubled families programme has been integrated into the main body of social work practice in some outstanding local authorities, where we have seen the development of a continuum of care, going from children's centres open to all at one end, all the way through to the most severe child protection cases, with the troubled families programme helping those in the middle. That is the group I will talk about as I bring my remarks to a close.

One group that has been neglected in public discourse until this point is children in need—children who are not fully in care but on the edge of care; who are on social services' radar but who do not receive all the services that somebody who is fostered or has been adopted might. It is a large group: there are about 400,000 children in need at any one time, and during the course of a year about 750,000 children are in need. Their outcomes are terrible, and are often worse than those we see for the looked-after population, as we

might expect, because these are the children who are left at home in disrupted, complex families, whereas their contemporaries who have been taken into care will have, if they are lucky, the stability of long-term fostering or an adoptive placement and will see their outcomes improve.

It is extremely important that we turn our attention to that group. I believe that, as a result of our bringing our social work profession into the 21st century and helping it to develop, social workers will have the skills, the appetite and the determination to help those people. I am delighted that the Department for Education is undertaking a review of the outcomes of children in need, as we announced in the Conservative party's general election manifesto last year.

Alex Cunningham: The hon. Gentleman is making a strong case for working with even more children, but that actually requires more people as well. I know he is impressed by the increase in money that the Government are putting in, and local authorities are also raising more, through council tax. However, does he agree that, in order to achieve the things that he wants, we need in the system more social workers with smaller workloads?

Alex Burghart: I certainly see the case that the hon. Gentleman makes. The point I was making, which is not completely dissimilar, is that the troubled families programme brings with it a large budget. I have been pleased to observe over the past few years that the proportion of families on the troubled families programme with a child in need has risen and risen, as more local authorities take that budget and apply it to those families who need it most. We have a much more responsive and particular system now than a few years ago.

We all aspire to having the most professional, best informed, most inspired and inspiration social workers anywhere in the world. I believe that we are heading in that direction, but it is not something that can be achieved overnight and it is not something that can be taken for granted. However, I am sure we all agree that, without the contribution that England's social workers make to vulnerable children and families, the world would be a considerably worse place.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I am obliged to call the first of the Front-Bench spokespeople at 5.7 pm. The guideline limits are 10 minutes for the Scottish National party spokesperson, 10 minutes for Her Majesty's official Opposition's spokesperson and 10 minutes for the Minister. I will invite the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) to sum up the debate after the Minister has concluded his remarks. Until 5.7 pm, the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) has the Floor.

4.53 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I had not intended to speak, but such has been the eloquence of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) that I feel impelled to complement his wise words. I first declare my interest in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, and I repeat my interest as a patron of the Social Worker of the Year awards, as is the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck).

I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate on what is an unfashionable subject that we hear little of in this place—that has been a problem for many years. Not only was he well-schooled when he arrived here 10 years ago, but his experience then included, as he has mentioned, his time working as an essential part of the Munro review, before moving on to Barnardo's and then becoming the deputy Children's Commissioner. He has vast experience, which he has already brought to bear in his short time in this place. I am glad that he has done so again today.

My hon. Friend mentioned social workers as the fifth emergency service. We used to refer to them as the fourth emergency service—we do not want to downplay them. Their difference from the other emergency services is that they are damned if they do and damned if they don't. Too often, they are subject to tabloid newspaper headlines that complain if they have the temerity to step in and take a child into care, particularly if the child is from a middle-class family who one would not expect to face action. They are damned if they do not step in early enough and take a child into care who subsequently becomes a Baby P, a Victoria Climbié or one of the many other high-profile cases, which are just the tip of the iceberg.

I am sure the Minister sees this now, but in my previous role as Children's Minister, the most depressing start to the week was going through an audit of the new cases of severe child abuse and child fatalities that had come in during the previous week and what progress they had made in the courts or whatever. I am afraid that the cases we saw in the headlines were just a fraction of what was going on, day in, day out. I think the situation is better, but there are still, and always will be, people who do terrible things to vulnerable children. Too often, it is only social workers who stand between those people and the welfare—indeed, the lives—of those children.

I am glad that my hon. Friend mentioned “No More Blame Game”, which was a really important piece of work back in 2007, before the whole Baby P issue blew up. It was all about trusting social workers, rather than just pointing the finger of blame, as I am afraid had been the default position of too many people in positions of responsibility. Time and again, I found myself reminding people, during media interviews and elsewhere, that it was not the social worker who killed that child. It was the parents, carers or others close to that child who actually did the damage. The social workers desperately tried to avoid that.

The job of the social worker is to try to detect early where a child is vulnerable and to try to make a judgment about an appropriate intervention. It is not a science. That is why one of my big mantras regarding social workers was that I wanted to give them the power and the confidence to make a mistake. There had been numerous child protection Bills since the Victoria Climbié case, and all were exceedingly well-intentioned, but their net result was to add to the rulebook—to add more regulations. By 2010, the “Working Together” manual ran to something like 760 pages.

Unison revealed that social workers were spending more than 80% of their time in front of computers filling in process forms, rather than spending time face-to-face with those children. The net result was that they were constantly ticking boxes to comply with the rules,

[Tim Loughton]

rather than using their gut instinct, their judgment and their training and professionalism to say, “Something isn’t quite right here. I’m going to step in and do something.” Occasionally, they will be wrong—as I say, it is not a science—but usually the decent social workers, as the vast majority are, will be right to do so. However, they lacked the confidence to step in because it was all about following the rulebook and ticking the boxes. That was a huge problem with the profession that caused them to lose confidence in doing the professional job that we wanted them to do.

Our review back in 2007 was an important start in saying that we need to trust social workers. We first flagged up the need to have a chief social worker to give the whole profession gravitas—a public face; somebody who was trusted—and to make sure that social worker training was integrated with other training as well. Some of the best safeguarding I have seen is when a social worker is sat next to a GP, who is sat next to a teacher, who is sat next to a police officer, in the same room, being taught from the same manual. Hot-desking is now often the favoured way forward in children’s centres and other multi-agency safeguarding hubs, which is absolutely right.

The Munro review was important. It was the first Department for Education review launched by the new Government in 2010. It was nothing to do with education; it was actually all about child protection and social work, which was not a fashionable subject in those days. The Munro review—Eileen Munro’s work was outstanding and respected, I think on all sides politically, and certainly throughout the profession—was all about how we peeled back some of the rules that were standing in the way of allowing social workers to get on with their job and use their professionalism and instincts to make the right judgments. It was a really important review.

My hon. Friend referred to children in need. It has been estimated that the cost of child neglect each and every year in this country is some £15 billion. That is £15 billion for not getting things right. Just think what we could achieve if a fraction of that were spent on prevention and ensuring that neglect became a thing of the past, or certainly a much more minority occupation. The Munro report was therefore very important.

The rewriting of the “Working Together” document, which was slimmed down from more than 750 pages to below 100, was also very important, because it set out the basic principles and then said to the social worker, “That is what you need to achieve. Now go out and do it. Use your professional talents to decide how you execute it in individual cases and, above all, spend time snooping around. Go into people’s homes. See people face to face. Eyeball those whom you suspect may be up to no good. Speak to the children—get the child’s voice and the child’s view on this.” That was so important.

It is also important that politicians and civil servants should have experience of that. I spent a year back in 2011 being a social worker in Stockport. I was going out on cases with real social workers—and gosh, they took me to some of their most challenging cases to see it like it is. My hon. Friend mentioned the former director of children’s services in Harrow, one of the most outstanding directors of children’s services that we had, who each week would take a group of children

in the care of Harrow Borough out bowling and engage with them and hear from them exactly what was going on. In the Department for Education, we set up four panels of children: one of foster-children, one of children in residential homes, one of recent care leavers and one of children who had been adopted. They came along and told us, without the carers, managers and officials there, what was actually going on. That is where I learnt some of my best information, as I did by going out with social workers on patrol, without directors and managers—their bosses. That is very important. I think and hope that in that time we re-established some of the credentials and confidence in social workers.

Alas, there is still a lot to do. Money has been protected for child safeguarding, but clearly, financial pressures are considerable at the moment. The number of children coming into the care system has continued to rise. That may be a good thing. I do not know whether we are taking too many or too few children into care. What I am concerned about is that we are taking the right children into care, at the right time, and looking after them properly once they are in the care of the state.

Alex Cunningham: I have a friend who has a leading role on a safeguarding board. She tells me that the workload has increased, particularly as there have been more case reviews and, because more children have been dying, there have had to be specific inquiries. The work is tremendously resource-intensive. Is the hon. Gentleman convinced that there are sufficient resources for people to do that work effectively?

Tim Loughton: There will never be enough resources for social work, as with so many things. Adult social care also faces serious challenges.

Alex Cunningham: Priorities.

Tim Loughton: It is a question of priorities and of intervening at the appropriate time; that is why I was a big fan of the early intervention fund, which was set up in the Department for Education. However, getting things wrong is the most costly outcome of the lot, and previously an awful lot of money was being wasted on the system and constraining social workers, rather than letting them get on with their job. The consequence was huge vacancy rates, too many locums filling the places and a lack of continuity, and the cost was that much more. The most costly thing of all was when things went really wrong, as they did with Baby P, Victoria Climbié and the other high-profile cases. The cost of putting that right was considerable, so it is a false economy not to be doing the things to which we have referred.

The all-party parliamentary group for children, which I have the privilege to co-chair, produced a report on the state of children’s social care last year, and we are doing an update on that. What it showed, above everything, was huge disparities between outcomes and experiences in different parts of the country. For example, a child in Blackpool has a 166-in-10,000 chance of being in the care system, while an equivalent child in Richmond in London has only a 30-in-10,000 chance. Richmond and Blackpool are very different places, but are they so different that more children get taken into care? We found huge differentials around the country on a whole range of thresholds, and we desperately need to learn from that. We need to learn from social workers why those different experiences and outcomes are happening.

At the end of the day, I found that those of our failing children's services departments—we have a large number in special measures at the moment—that were turned around most effectively were not those with some new structure, process, trust or whatever imposed on them, but those where an inspirational leader, director of children's services, went in and trusted his or her staff. And ultimately, many of the successful, recovering children's services authorities came through with the majority of the social workers they had started with.

I remember that one director of children's services who gave evidence to our inquiry said that he went into the county, got his social workers together and said to them, "Name all your cases." When it got up to about 15 or 16, they could not remember the others, so he said, "Well, that's probably about the case load you should have, isn't it?" and that was what he put into effect. It is now one of the best-performing—I will not name it—children's services departments in the country and is spreading that good practice to other counties and authorities around the country.

It is not rocket science, but it would be much more difficult without the dedicated social workers whom we have in this country. We do not value them enough—I think we value them more than we did—which is why it is essential, when we have opportunities such as this, that we say thank you to social workers for the outstanding job they do despite all the challenges they face every day.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): If the Minister starts his remarks at 5.17 pm and I split the time between now and then, that gives both Opposition spokespeople five minutes each. I will set the clock to assist them to achieve that task.

5.6 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) for securing the debate and for his summary of the subject. I agree with him that we have to learn from people with experience of care, and that is happening in Scotland. The Who Cares? Scotland "1000 Voices" manifesto is about a pledge to listen to 1,000 young people with direct experience of care. That is very welcome.

As we have heard, social workers play a vital role in our society by standing up for the most vulnerable children and adults and ensuring that they are safeguarded from harm or supported to live independently. The work falls into the remit of a number of Departments—Education, Health, employment, social security and potentially others such as the Home Office and Justice—and it can often be multi-agency. Similarly, social workers work in a variety of settings, supporting individuals, families and groups within the community and working in homes, schools, hospitals or the premises of various public and voluntary organisations.

Social workers frequently work unsocial hours, and in making a positive difference to other people's lives find themselves under considerable pressure and strain. Figures supplied by Unison highlighted the fact that 80% of its social worker members experienced

"emotional distress during the day"

and almost half felt "over the limit" with the volume of cases for which they were responsible. There can be no doubt that the role is challenging at the best of times,

and of course if something does go seriously wrong, it can attract a huge volume of negative media coverage, significantly adding to workers' stress levels.

Last year, Scotland's Social Work Services Strategic Forum found that the public actually have a more positive view of social services than social service workers and institutions perceive. Overall, people in Scotland are positive about social services' impact on society and believe that those services perform an important public role. Indeed, 73% of the public agree that social services play an important role in supporting the most vulnerable people in communities. That is a good statistic and one that we should not tire of telling people about.

I am pleased to say that that has also been my experience. My constituency is fairly typical of the demographic challenges faced across many parts of the country. That means that the role of social workers becomes ever more important in supporting people living with dementia and their family carers. When family carers, who are often advanced in years themselves, become ill, it is often to the social work service that they turn.

The recent bad weather—two weeks ago—brought knee-deep snow across my local area. I am aware of social workers going the extra mile until the situation stabilised. There are many examples of social workers going on foot from their own home to the homes of service users living in their neighbourhoods, and providing help with personal care when the social care providers were unable to get through the snow. I am aware of staff from children's services in the Falkirk Council area, for example, staying on for double shifts and staying overnight at colleagues' homes to ensure that they were ready and able to be back in work the next day. As a result, all the children and young people were cared for by a consistent residential care staff, despite the snow and freezing conditions. I am grateful for their efforts and commitment to the role.

Similar examples occurred in the West Lothian Council area, where staff went above and beyond to ensure that residents who rely on them for care were supported during the bad weather. Staff turned up for shifts when not scheduled to work, to ensure care could still be provided if colleagues were unable to come in due to the conditions, and helped out in other areas. To give just one positive example, a member of staff who went to pick up a prescription for a service user was told by the chemist of other vulnerable people unable to collect prescriptions, and delivered the lot. That kind of commitment above and beyond is often overlooked.

I take this opportunity to publicly put on record my thanks to all who helped out during those difficult days a few weeks ago, but social workers play a vital—sometimes thankless—role throughout the year. The recent inclement weather conditions simply helped to highlight how essential that role has been to members of our community.

In conclusion, social workers are highly qualified and professional individuals, who contribute greatly to our society and to the protection of our most vulnerable citizens. We must therefore ensure that they are not working under undue strain, and that they are adequately resourced to support the public services and meet the demands we place upon them.

5.10 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) for securing this important debate ahead of next week's World Social Work Day.

There is a general misunderstanding of what social workers do. As a result, they are often treated with suspicion by not only the general public, but many politicians in this place. True to type, when something is not understood by politicians, they seek to over-regulate and control it. This Government are treading that path too.

There are over 114,000 social workers in the UK. Before becoming a Member of Parliament, I was proud to be one of them, working in the field of child protection. Each of those social workers works a demanding week of approximately 46 hours in a physically, emotionally and mentally demanding job. I recall being regularly assaulted, punched, spat at, needing security escort and being held in victim support. It is therefore vital that the Government support and value the profession, but they do not.

The problems social workers face are not of their own doing or by their own design. Many people in the profession tell me that things are not getting better; things are getting worse. That should be no surprise to anyone following what the Government are doing to services and the most vulnerable in our country. Sure Starts and early years services have been decimated. We have heard a lot today about the Munro review. It is a real shame that the Government did not implement her suggested legal duty to provide early intervention services. Labour Members understand that that is vital; it is a shame the Government do not.

Disability benefits have been slashed. Public sector job losses have occurred on a massive scale. We have record levels of in-work poverty. Support and advice services are shutting. Mental health services have been stripped to the bone. Our NHS is creaking at the seams and our adult social care system is broken.

Alex Cunningham: My local authority, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council, has suffered a 52% cut since 2010. It now spends 57% of the money it has on social care. Is my hon. Friend aware of this happening elsewhere in the country, and does she wonder, like I do, how councils are managing to deliver what they do deliver?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: My hon. Friend is spot on: this is happening in other councils right across the country; it is not confined to his own. In fact, there is a reported funding gap of £2.5 billion by 2020, with more than 400,000 people no longer able to access social care.

Children's services are grappling with the highest numbers of children in care since the 1980s and facing a funding gap of £2 billion by 2020, as referral rates continue to rise at a staggering pace. The fact is, social work simply cannot be separated from the wider environment. Social work is interlinked with wider societal and economic issues. If one part of the system is depleted, the other is depleted, and it is social work clients who suffer.

Social workers know that all too well, because they see it every single day. Entering their eighth year of a pay freeze, 60% of social workers have stated that they

feel Government austerity has had a dramatic impact on their ability to make a difference. The Government certainly have the profession in their sights. Since 2010, there has been an aggressive focus, which, as noted by the National Audit Office and a number of cross-party groups, is yielding no positive results in the reform of social work or social work assessment and accreditation, giving a clear signal that this Government feel the problems are with social workers, not the system.

With that in mind, can the Minister can shed any light on the hash that has been made of the new accreditation for social workers? After an embarrassing climbdown, accreditation will now only be of 4% of social workers by 2020, as opposed to the planned 100%. Since there is a groundswell of opposition from the profession, does the Minister not think it is about time to scrap this nonsense altogether?

Social Work England, another Department for Education initiative born out of zero discussion with the profession, has also been subject to some backtracking, after the Government thankfully failed to secure direct regulation of social workers. Will the Minister explain when the regulations will be produced for Social Work England? Clarity is needed regarding transition from the Health and Care Professionals Council, and social workers need some assurances that they will not be hit with exorbitant fees. Both of those developments signify to the profession that the Government have little faith in them and feel they need to be regulated and subjected to state control to a much higher degree than any other profession. Will the Minister please explain why that is?

In spite of all that, the profession survives. Excellent social work happens every single day in all areas of our country. Children and adults are protected from harm and their lives are improved. If the Minister really believes that our children, adults and families need the very best, he is in a position where he can actually deliver on what our profession is crying out for. I wonder if he will commit to that today and offer more than just warm words.

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): Let me begin by tackling the issue of funding, which has been raised a couple of times by colleagues here. We are keen to understand the sector's concerns about funding and the demand on children's services. We are currently consulting on the fair funding review. We have heard the sector's concerns about the fairness of current funding for their local authorities and the challenges that children's services in particular are facing in managing demand. The Department for Education and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government have commissioned independent research to inform the fair funding review. We are very much cognisant of that fact.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: I have a lot to say about Social Work England and the accreditation and assessment, so I would like to make some headway. Maybe, if I have time, I will come back to the hon. Lady.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) on securing this important debate. Listening to him speak, the sheer depth of experience he has in this hugely important

area soon becomes clear. From the world of think-tanks, the Eileen Munro review, the charity sector, the Children's Commissioner, and more recently as a constituency Member of Parliament, his experience is considerable and wide-ranging. So too is the experience of my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). I could listen to them all day and I have been taking note of everything they say.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar focused his contribution on the work of children and family social workers and I will respond accordingly, but before I do so, I should place on record the valuable work done by those in the adult social care community. When I speak of the value to society of social workers, I very much include all social workers.

Above all else, we agree on a single unarguable point: social workers have a vital job in ensuring that vulnerable adults, children and families receive the best possible support to help them to overcome the challenges they face, and to enable them to look positively towards their future. I have only been Minister for children and families for a few months, but so far, from my visits to children's services across the country, I have seen a dedicated and passionate workforce. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham described what is needed in one word: leadership. When we see good leadership, we see good outcomes for children. Every day, social workers deal with complex and challenging situations. The one thing they say to me is that the real magic sauce—whether it is the trust in Doncaster that has turned it around, or in Hackney, which had a turnaround—is consistent leadership: people they can refer to and teams they can work with, knowing they will be there the next day.

Social workers play a unique role in supporting people, often at the most difficult times in their lives. To do that successfully, they require a distinctive set of skills, knowledge and values. To do their job well requires compassion, empathy, analytical thinking and an understanding of the positive impact they can have in people's lives. They work with complexity, uncertainty and conflict within a complex legal framework. They are required to use sound professional judgment in balancing needs, risks and resources to achieve the right outcomes. Done well, social work can improve people's opportunities and quality of life, enabling them to lead the lives they want to lead.

In my constituency, I often hear from people in the social care system. It is overwhelming. To work closely, day in, day out, with such difficult and sometimes devastating cases requires exceptional passion and resilience. Members across Parliament will all be familiar with that from their surgeries. It is a job that a precious and extraordinary minority undertake and we must do all we can to support, empower and elevate the profession. As a Minister, I see this as one of my key priorities, and I will do my utmost to ensure that social workers get the recognition they deserve.

The debate is timely. As colleagues have mentioned, World Social Work Day is a week today and provides a moment to pause, reflect and celebrate the difference that social workers make. We in Government will be doing our bit to promote and champion the profession, both in what we say publicly and in how we support social workers.

All children, no matter where they live, should have access to the same high-quality care and support. That is about empowering social workers to excel even further in their practice, as well as building public confidence in the social work profession. One thing is clear: the quality of social work practice is, above all, the core of what we want to achieve. This is vital work and the reason we are prioritising social work reform. Social workers are not always given the right tools for the job, and can be held back by burdensome systems, which we have heard colleagues eloquently describe, including the horrendous time it takes to fill in a form.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar spoke with authority about the Munro review, about reducing bureaucracy and about empowering professional judgement. What he said is true, and while great progress has been made, more is to be done. Those entering the social work profession must have the best training possible. Teaching partnerships bring together universities and local authorities to improve the quality of social work degrees. Good continuing professional development is also essential, particularly at key stages of a social worker's career such as the daunting task of moving from education to employment and when stepping up from the frontline to managing and supervising teams, and for those aspiring to be social work practice leaders. I believe that these reforms will have a positive impact for all and, most importantly, vulnerable children, families and adults in need of support.

I draw attention to two specific reforms mentioned by the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck). The first is the new accreditation scheme for child and family social workers. Through that innovative programme, we will introduce post-qualifying standards for child and family social work expertise, based on the current knowledge and skills statements, and offer voluntary assessment against them. The introduction of the standards will mean that employers and social workers will have a national benchmark to aim for, and learning and development can be planned in line with meeting the standard. If a social worker takes the assessment and becomes accredited, they may be offered career development opportunities, including promotion. I heard it directly from social workers who are involved in the early stage. We are doing this with social workers, rather than to them.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Nadhim Zahawi: I have not got much time, but let me see how far I get because I want to talk about Social Work England as well.

We are supporting local authorities and social workers to get ready for this new system in a unique way, working with early adopters. Rather than, as in the example given by my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar, stuff being done to them by IT people who know nothing, we are co-creating the assessment and accreditation. We will be working with more than 150 children and family social workers. I am also delighted that Essex County Council is in discussions with the Department about becoming a phase 2 national assessment and accreditation system site from 2019.

The other major reform I want to highlight is establishing Social Work England. Focused purely on social work, this bespoke professional regulator will cover both children

[*Nadhim Zahawi*]

and family social workers and those working in adult services. Social Work England will have public protection at the heart of all its work, but it is more than just that. It will support professionalism and standards across the social work profession.

Alex Cunningham: I have two small questions. First, I agree with the need for ongoing professional development, but where will the time come from in social workers' busy schedules to take this critical training? Secondly, does the Minister not agree that it is time that social workers got a decent pay rise?

Nadhim Zahawi: I dealt with funding at the outset. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar that funding has increased since 2010.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Does the Minister share his predecessor's view that local authority children's services departments do not need any more money because they are not spending what they currently have appropriately? How on earth does he think it conceivable that any difference can be made, even if money is put into the system, when ongoing Government austerity is cutting every other service that impacts on children's social services?

Nadhim Zahawi: I have already put on record what we are doing in terms of reviewing the funding for this area.

As a social care-specific regulator, Social Work England will develop an in-depth understanding of the profession. It will use that to set profession-specific standards that clarify expectations about the knowledge, skills, values and behaviours required to become and remain a registered social worker. Finally, it will play a key role in promoting public confidence in the profession, championing the profession and helping to raise the status of social work.

It is fair to say that creating a new regulator is no easy task, but we are making great progress. In December, we launched the recruitment of the chair and CEO of Social Work England. In February, we launched a

consultation on Social Work England's regulatory framework. I think that the hon. Lady mistakenly alluded to there being no consultation, but there clearly was. The consultation sets out our approach to establishing the secondary legislative framework for Social Work England. Our ambition is to create a proportionate and efficient regulator. As part of this, we need Social Work England to be able to operate systems and processes that adapt to emerging opportunities, challenges and best practice. That means it can ensure professional regulation reflects the changing reality of delivering social work practice safely and effectively.

I shall end there in an attempt to be disciplined in the timekeeping that you asked of us, Mr Hollobone.

5.28 pm

Alex Burghart: I thank you very much, Mr Hollobone, and all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate.

One of the resounding messages that we can send out from this place is that we all value highly the work that social workers do. It is an extraordinarily difficult job. When we contemplate the families who are helped by the expertise of this professional body, we have only to imagine what would happen if those social workers were not there. If we left those families and children in homes with extraordinarily complex mental health problems, addiction, alcohol and drug dependency and the most extraordinary and extreme forms of family breakdown, without that professional support, we could only expect the absolute worst for them.

The social work profession gives so much to society. At its most extreme, it keeps people alive, but in a sense it does more than that: it gives people a life. It helps them to overcome their barriers to work, to good health and to opportunity. Being a frontline social worker is, too often, a highly complex and difficult task, but it does not have to be a thankless one. It is incumbent on all of us to support our social workers in policy terms and in professional terms.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Tuesday 13 March 2018

TREASURY

Spring Statement

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): Making a success of EU exit is a priority for the Government and the Treasury. At the Autumn Budget 2017, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer committed £3 billion over the next two financial years to helping Departments and the devolved Administrations to prepare. Working with colleagues across Government to prioritise the essential programmes to realise the opportunities from EU exit, the Treasury has allocated funding to Departments as follows in 2018-19:

Department	£ million
Cabinet Office	49.4
Competition and Markets Authority	23.6
Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	185.1
Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport	26.2
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	310.0
Department for International Trade	74.0
Department for Transport	75.8
Department of Health and Social Care	21.1
Food Standards Agency	14.0
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	29.6
HM Revenue & Customs	260.0
HM Treasury	24.8
Home Office	395.0
Ministry of Defence	12.7
Ministry of Justice	17.3
Northern Ireland Office	0.4
Office for National Statistics	2.0
Scotland Office	0.3
The National Archives	1.2
Wales Office	0.3

This has generated the following Barnett consequentials for the devolved Administrations:

	£ million
Northern Ireland Executive	15.2
Scottish Government	37.3
Welsh Government	21.4

The Government are committed to seeking a new future economic partnership with the European Union and this funding will help us to prepare for all eventualities. As the negotiations continue, we will need to reflect upon any progress and consider requirements accordingly. I will work with my colleagues across Government to ensure these allocations achieve value for money for the taxpayer. Final allocations will be made at the 2018-19 Supplementary Estimates in early 2019.

[HCWS540]

Spring Statement: Consultations

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):

Today I set out the Government's first spring statement, as part of the move to a single fiscal event. As described in the paper HM Treasury published in December, the new fiscal cycle provides opportunities for the Government to consult more openly at earlier stages of policymaking. This statement delivers on that commitment, it does not make tax or spending changes, but sets out some areas on which the Government will consult over the summer.

Tax and the digital economy

Today the Government will publish the following policy documents that set out our approach to adapting the tax system to meet the challenges and opportunities of the digital economy:

Corporate tax and the digital economy—an update on the Government's position paper on the challenges posed by the digital economy for the international corporate tax framework. This sets out the Government's proposed approach to addressing those challenges to ensure the corporate tax system is fair across different types of businesses, while protecting the UK's start-up culture and position as a global tech leader.

Alternative methods of VAT collection—split payment—a consultation on a proposed split payment model to reduce online VAT fraud and improve how VAT is collected.

The role of online platforms in ensuring tax compliance by their users—a call for evidence to explore what more online platforms can do to help their users pay the right amount of tax.

Cash and digital payments in the new economy—a call for evidence looking at the role of cash and digital payments in the new economy. This will explore how the Government can further support digital payments, ensure the ability to pay by cash is available for those who need it, and crack down on the minority who use cash to evade tax and launder money.

Business rates: delivering more frequent revaluations—a summary of responses to a consultation on the implementation of more frequent revaluations of non-domestic properties for business rates purposes, and the announcement that the next revaluation will be brought forward by one year to 2021. This means three-year revaluations will take effect in 2024.

Growth & productivity

Today the Government will publish the following consultations on changes to help boost productivity and growth across the UK economy:

Self-funded training—a consultation on improving the way the tax system supports self-funded training by employees and the self-employed. This will explore extending the scope of tax relief currently available to employees and the self-employed for work-related training costs to support upskilling and retraining.

The VAT registration threshold—as set out at autumn Budget 2017, the Government are not minded to reduce the VAT threshold. This call for evidence will seek views on whether the design of the VAT threshold could better incentivise small business growth.

Allowing Entrepreneurs' Relief on gains made before dilution—a technical consultation on changes to entrepreneurs' relief to ensure that it does not discourage entrepreneurs from seeking external finance for their companies.

Knowledge intensive Enterprise Investment Scheme (EIS) fund—a consultation on the introduction of a new knowledge intensive EIS fund structure with additional incentives to attract investment.

VAT, Air Passenger Duty and tourism in Northern Ireland—a call for evidence that will look at the impact of VAT and Air Passenger Duty on tourism in Northern Ireland.

In the coming months the Government will publish:

Improving business productivity—BEIS will publish a call for evidence to understand how best we can help the UK's least productive businesses to learn from, and catch-up with, the most productive.

Delivering a fair payment culture for small businesses—BEIS will launch a call for evidence on how to eliminate unfair payment practices to small businesses.

Prompt payment by Government suppliers—the Cabinet Office will launch a consultation on making a supplier's approach to payments to its own suppliers part of the selection process for larger government contracts.

Transferable Tax History (TTH) for oil and gas—a consultation on draft legislation to introduce a transferable tax history for oil and gas companies, to encourage new investment in UK oil and gas fields.

Petroleum Revenue Tax (PRT) deduction for decommissioning costs—a consultation on draft legislation to allow a petroleum revenue tax deduction for decommissioning costs incurred by a previous licence holder, to encourage investment in UK oil and gas fields.

Green growth

The tax system can be a lever to encourage people and businesses to make healthier, more environmentally responsible choices. The Government are committed to improving air quality in the UK's towns and cities, and protecting the environment for future generations.

Today the Government will publish:

Single-use plastics waste—a call for evidence seeking views on how the tax system or charges could reduce the amount of single-use plastics waste, to protect the environment. This will look at the whole supply chain for single-use plastics, including alternative materials, reusable options and recycling opportunities, to consider how the tax system and charges can help drive technological progress and behavioural change.

In the coming months the Government will publish:

Red diesel use in non-agricultural, non-road mobile machinery—a call for evidence into whether the use of red diesel tax relief discourages the purchase of cleaner engines. The primary focus of this call for evidence will be on improving air quality outcomes, particularly in urban areas. Red diesel for agricultural use will be outside the scope of the call for evidence, as will home heating use and other static generators.

Reforming VED rates for vans—a consultation on reducing VED rates for the cleanest vans through creating a graduated first year rate, as is already in place for cars, to encourage cleaner choices and improve environmental outcomes.

Tax avoidance, evasion & non-compliance

Today the Government will publish:

Extension of security deposit legislation—a consultation on how to extend existing security deposit policy to include corporation tax and Construction Industry Scheme deductions for taxpayers deemed at high risk of not paying and with a history of non-compliance.

In the coming months the Government will publish:

Off-payroll working—a consultation on how to tackle non-compliance in the private sector, drawing on the experience of the public sector reform. The Government will work with businesses and individuals to mitigate the potential administrative burdens of any future changes.

Tackling Corporate Insolvency and phoenixism risks—a discussion document exploring further means for tackling the small minority who deliberately abuse the insolvency regime in trying to avoid or evade their tax liabilities, including through the use of phoenixism.

Tackling construction sector supply chain fraud—a technical consultation on draft legislation for a VAT reverse charge. This will help to eliminate the threat of 'missing trader' fraud in construction industry supply chains, which is where

the supplier retains the VAT that it collects on its sales. The reverse charge will achieve this by shifting responsibility to the customer for paying VAT to HMRC where the customer is a VAT-registered construction business.

Profit fragmentation—a consultation on the best way to prevent UK traders or professionals from avoiding UK tax by arranging for UK trading income to be transferred to unrelated foreign entities.

Other/maintaining the tax system

Today the Government will publish:

Heated tobacco—a response to the consultation on the tax treatment of heated tobacco products.

In the coming months the Government will publish:

Gaming Duty: review of accounting periods—a consultation to seek views on bringing the administration of gaming duty more into line with the other gambling duties.

Short-term business visitors—a consultation on how to simplify the tax treatment of short-term business visitors from the foreign branch of a UK company, to ensure the UK is an attractive location to headquarter a business.

Capital Gains Tax payment window—a technical consultation on the design of the system requiring capital gains tax due on a disposal of residential property to be paid within 30 days of completion.

VAT and vouchers—a response to a consultation on changes to the VAT treatment of vouchers. This change will amend VAT law to ensure that when customers pay with vouchers, businesses account for the same amount of VAT as when other means of payment are used.

Taxation of trusts—a consultation on how to make the taxation of trusts simpler, fairer and more transparent.

Large business compliance—a response to the consultation into HMRC's process for risk- profiling large businesses, to improve HMRC's Business Risk Review process, reflecting and further enhancing the shift in large business compliance behaviours.

[HCWS541]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The Minister for Asia and the Pacific, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) attended the Foreign Affairs Council on 26 February. The Council was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Brussels.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS COUNCIL

Current Affairs

Ministers called for urgent implementation of UN Security Council resolution 2401 of 24 February which demanded a cessation of hostilities in Syria to enable delivery of humanitarian assistance. They agreed that the High Representative would send a letter to the Foreign Ministers of Russia, Turkey and Iran—the three guarantors of the Astana Process—to ask them to work on implementation of the resolution.

Moldova

Ministers discussed the Republic of Moldova and adopted conclusions. Ministers reiterated the EU's commitment to strengthening bilateral relations while

underlining the need to continue adopting and implementing key reforms for the benefit of Moldovan citizens.

Venezuela

Ministers exchanged views on the political stalemate in the country following the suspension of the Santo Domingo talks between the Government and the opposition and the announcement of presidential elections scheduled for 22 April.

Ministers expressed their solidarity with Spain, following the decision by the Venezuelan authorities to declare the ambassador of Spain in Caracas persona non grata and agreed to continue closely monitoring the situation and to keep channels of communication open, both with the opposition and with the Government.

Middle east peace process

Ministers discussed recent developments in the middle east peace process in preparation for the lunch with representatives of the League of Arab States.

Informal lunch

Over lunch with the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States (LAS) and members of the LAS ministerial delegation on Jerusalem, Ministers discussed options for reviving the middle east peace process in an inclusive manner, with the objective of achieving a two-state solution and Jerusalem as the future capital of both states. Ministers also discussed the importance of increasing collective, international support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

Ministers agreed a number of measures without discussion:

The Council adopted conclusions on Burma;

The Council adopted conclusions on Cambodia;

The Council adopted conclusions on the Maldives;

The Council adopted conclusions on climate diplomacy;

The Council adopted conclusions on EU priorities at United Nations human rights fora in 2018;

The Council adopted conclusions on human trafficking in south/south-east Asia;

The Council increased the restrictive measures against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea;

The Council added the Minister of Industry and the Minister of Information of the Government of Syria to the list of those targeted by EU restrictive measures;

The Council adopted legal texts imposing restrictive measures on one person for his activities in support of Daesh;

The Council adopted the common military list of the EU;

The Council adopted a decision on the continuation of EU funding for the activities of the European network of independent non-proliferation and disarmament think tanks;

The Council approved an extension for the implementation of EU strategy against proliferation of weapons of mass destruction;

The Council adopted a decision on continuing to provide assistance to the provisional technical secretariat of the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty organisation;

The Council agreed the annotated agenda for the first meeting of the EU-Cuba Joint Council;

The Council decided not to oppose the adoption of five Commission food regulations (Health)

[HCWS539]

Petition

Tuesday 13 March 2018

OBSERVATIONS

WORK AND PENSIONS

East End Jobcentre Closures

The petition of residents of Glasgow East constituency.

Declares that the Department for Work and Pensions plans to close Jobcentres in Glasgow, including Parkhead Jobcentre and Easterhouse Jobcentre, will impact tens of thousands of people in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance, Employment Support Allowance and Universal Credit, and that the consequences will be severely felt by some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people; have concerns that these closures will result in the poorest communities not being serviced by a Jobcentre and make it even harder for those seeking employment to get support, with people running a greater risk of falling foul of the UK Government's sanctions regime; and are further concerned that these plans will also impact Scottish workers who will be forced to relocate to other Jobcentres.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to urge the Government to halt any move to close Glasgow's Jobcentres, publish thorough Equality Assessments and go through a full and proper consultation before making any decisions on the future of the estate.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by David Linden , *Official Report*, 16 January 2018; Vol. 634, c. 851.]

[P002097]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey):

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) employs around 80,000 people administering the state pension and a range of working age, disability and ill-health benefits to more than 22 million claimants and customers. We do this from over 900 sites, of which around 700 are jobcentres. The way we interact with our customers is changing, as are their needs and expectations, and so we must change too.

In March 2018, the 20-year contract covering the majority of DWP current estate of over 900 sites comes to an end. This has presented an opportunity to re-evaluate what we need from our estate. The increased use of our online services in recent years, coupled with reductions in unemployment and improved efficiency, means that 20% of the rent currently paid by DWP is going toward space we are not using.

In response, we have sought to redesign our estate in a way that delivers value for the taxpayer. We would stress that this is not about reducing services, but about taking the opportunity to stop spending money on empty space so we can spend more on supporting those in need.

We want an estate that enables us to create more modern, digitally enabled, engaging environments which fit the ethos of universal credit and also reflect the falling claimant count. Our changes will lead to savings to the taxpayer in the order of £135 million a year, on average, for the next 10 years.

In 2015, Glasgow had 16 jobcentres—more per 100,000 of the population than any other similar sized city in the UK. These jobcentres were on average around 40% utilised. The jobcentres had built up historically within the four quarters of Glasgow, primarily within large housing estates. As a result, Glasgow had more smaller sites and as unemployment has dropped across the city, so has the use of some of these smaller jobcentres. These small, half-empty offices make it challenging to create a welcoming and positive environment. We proposed to bring these smaller jobcentres together into larger existing sites within the city's four quarters. The larger sites are all geographically based in locations around the city that can offer better services to our customers.

An announcement made on Wednesday 7 December 2016 confirmed that eight of the 16 Glasgow jobcentres were proposed for closure. A detailed equality analysis was completed for each of these sites and the findings were used to understand the potential impact on both the people using our services and DWP employees. In addition, DWP carried out three public consultations, through which it gathered knowledge about each local area, including potential new journey times and costs for claimants.

DWP considered this additional information and changed its original proposal. In July 2017, we confirmed that two of the eight jobcentres originally proposed for closure would be retained (Castlemilk and Cambuslang) and that six Glasgow jobcentres would close and merge with larger nearby jobcentres. Four of the six mergers have already taken place—Anniesland, Maryhill, Langside and Bridgeton jobcentres. Easterhouse and Parkhead are due to merge with Shettleston jobcentre in February 2018. Even with the reduction to 10 jobcentres, Glasgow will still have the second highest number of jobcentres per head of population than other cities of a similar size.

Our Work Coaches personalise the support they provide for each claimant, taking account of individual need and circumstance, including capability, disability and caring responsibilities, when arranging any attendance. DWP has various ways of interacting with vulnerable claimants, including face-to-face, email, telephone, post and SMS.

Our Work Coaches recognise that following each merger, some claimants will be taking an unfamiliar journey. They will support them throughout the transition to their new jobcentre and we do not expect the changes to result in additional sanctions.

We have undertaken one-to-one conversations with all staff who have been impacted by these changes. In addition to gathering information about individual needs, such as caring responsibilities, those conversations also provided an important opportunity to discuss potential changes to each individual's journey to work and allowed the opportunity to explore the scope to move to new locations.

Information gathered from those conversations was recorded and considered in each site equality analysis before the decision to close a jobcentre was confirmed. All DWP staff affected by jobcentre closures in Glasgow have been, or will be, redeployed to another jobcentre. DWP has consulted and worked closely with departmental trade union sides throughout this process.

As with all major changes delivered by DWP, we are implementing reorganisation of our estate in a staged and controlled way. We are taking this approach because

there are a significant number of activities that need to take place to move our people, our claimants and the associated caseloads to the new jobcentre. In phasing work in this way, we can minimise the risk of any disruption to vital services.

The confirmed office moves and mergers are arranged as part of a much bigger, complex sequence of changes involving a number of suppliers and contractors. To halt the reorganisation of our estate in Glasgow now would be detrimental to claimants, taxpayers and the services we deliver.

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 13 March 2018

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PETITION

Tuesday 13 March 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>
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**not later than
Tuesday 20 March 2018**

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