

**Wednesday  
28 March 2018**

**Volume 638  
No. 119**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Wednesday 28 March 2018**

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# House of Commons

*Wednesday 28 March 2018*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

### NEW WRIT

*Ordered,*

That the Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new Writ for the electing of a Member to serve in this present Parliament for the County constituency of West Tyrone in the room of Columba Barry McElduff, who since his election for the said County constituency has been appointed to the Office of Steward and Bailiff of Her Majesty's Three Chiltern Hundreds of Stoke, Desborough and Burnham in the County of Buckingham.—(*Julian Smith.*)

### ROYAL ASSENT

**Mr Speaker:** I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Northern Ireland (Regional Rates and Energy) Act 2018

Northern Ireland Assembly Members (Pay) Act 2018

Northern Ireland Budget (Anticipation and Adjustments) Act 2018.

## Oral Answers to Questions

### CABINET OFFICE

*The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—*

#### Leaving the EU: The Union

1. **Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on strengthening the Union during the process by which the UK leaves the EU. [904617]

10. **Kwasi Kwarteng** (Spelthorne) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on strengthening the Union during the process by which the UK leaves the EU. [904628]

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington):** The Government are unapologetically committed to the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom. As the Minister responsible for constitutional issues across the Government and as chair of a number of Cabinet Committees, I have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues about such issues.

**Gavin Robinson:** I am grateful to the Minister for that reply and for his commitment to our precious Union. He knows that Northern Ireland will achieve a significant milestone on the day after the transition period: its centenary as part of this Union. Will he agree to meet

me and some of my colleagues to discuss how best to advance the celebration and recognition of that achievement?

**Mr Lidington:** I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues, as I am always happy to talk to the elected representatives of Northern Ireland constituencies here. It is important that we find a way to mark that centenary appropriately and do so in a way that is genuinely inclusive and recognises the sensitivities associated with many centenary anniversaries affecting the island of Ireland that have fallen in recent years.

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** Given that we are leaving the EU, will my right hon. Friend assure this House that he will do everything he can to preserve the single market of the United Kingdom, which is infinitely more important to many Unionist Members than the single market of the EU?

**Mr Lidington:** My hon. Friend is right. The United Kingdom's common market existed well before we joined the European Union, and it will continue to exist after we leave. The living standards of people in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland alike benefit from the existence and strength of the internal market of the United Kingdom, and the Government will do their utmost to protect and defend it.

**Martin Whitfield** (East Lothian) (Lab): Given that the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill places additional and somewhat unwarranted restrictions on Scottish Government Ministers that do not apply to Ministers down here, does the right hon. Gentleman think that that strategy strengthens the Union or puts it at risk?

**Mr Lidington:** The withdrawal Bill, in providing for the transfer of considerable additional powers from Brussels to the devolved Governments in Scotland and Wales both strengthens devolution and upholds our constitutional settlement.

**Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my frustration at the actions and attitude of the SNP Government regarding clause 11 of the withdrawal Bill? While he has been working on an agreement with the devolved Administrations, they have been blocking, frustrating, agitating and doing everything in their power to manufacture a constitutional crisis in our family of nations.

**Mr Lidington:** One of the virtues that I have sought to cultivate in this job is patience, as well as endurance, so we continue talking to both the Scottish and Welsh Governments, but the allegations of a so-called power grab are completely unmerited.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): Under a previous UK Government, up to 90% of the Welsh fishing quota was sold to foreign firms. This Union now has more than one Government, so what discussions is the Minister having with colleagues in the Welsh Government about the future allocation of the Welsh fishing quota?

**Mr Lidington:** One of the tasks that faces us, as the United Kingdom, as we leave the European Union is to devise the appropriate fisheries regime that provides a just result for fishing communities in all parts of the

UK. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is looking forward to discussing that future with the devolved Administrations and with parliamentarians.

### Electoral Fraud

2. **Chris Philp** (Croydon South) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to tackle electoral fraud.

[904619]

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith):** Electoral fraud is unacceptable at any level, and vulnerabilities cannot be allowed to continue to undermine the integrity of our democracy, so the Cabinet Office is working with five local authorities to pilot voter identification and with three others to pilot measures to improve the integrity of the postal and proxy vote processes.

**Chris Philp:** What efforts are being made to cross-reference the electoral roll with the immigration and nationality database to ensure that only people with eligible nationalities appear on the electoral roll and can therefore vote?

**Chloe Smith:** We entrust electoral registration officers to do that task, and we think it is very important that they do so. Electoral registration officers have the ability to make nationality checks where they believe it is appropriate. Indeed, this House also recently agreed to changes to the registration forms to emphasise to would-be voters that such checks will be made, and we think that is important.

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Over 40 leading charities and academics have written to the Minister expressing their concern that these voter ID pilot areas have failed to carry out equality impact assessments adequately. Most participating authorities have identified negative impacts on various groups, such as people with disabilities, Asian and black communities and Travellers, but astonishingly Bromley Borough Council claims the pilot will have no impact on any of those groups. Why is the Minister allowing these pilots to proceed on the basis of such clearly inadequate equality impact assessments?

**Chloe Smith:** These pilots are, in fact, very important. They allow us, as a country, to begin to be sure that the people voting in any given election are eligible to do so. I continue to be disappointed that the Labour party seems to think that that is not necessary. Each local authority involved in these pilots has clear plans, first, to be able to communicate with voters to instruct them on what to do on the day and, secondly, to help anybody who might find themselves unable to produce the required ID. Nobody will be left behind in these pilots.

### Women and Political Office

3. **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): What assessment he has made of the nature and extent of barriers to women seeking election to political office. [904620]

**The Minister without Portfolio (Brandon Lewis):** The Government Equalities Office has commissioned a review to identify barriers that limit women's participation in national Government, the aim being to provide political parties with a range of solutions to draw on. We will

also launch a consultation this summer on the introduction of a new electoral offence to tackle the intimidation of parliamentary candidates and campaigners.

**Eddie Hughes:** Can my right hon. Friend suggest what more can be done to counter the often toxic atmosphere on social media that is frequently directed at female candidates?

**Brandon Lewis:** My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and he is right. Sadly, it is noticeable that abuse on social media is particularly directed at women. We recently enacted the Digital Economy Act 2017 to help ensure that online abuse is effectively tackled through a robust code; but ultimately, as political parties, we have our bit to do to make sure we give people protection online—robust debate but with respect—and it is very sad that the Labour party has failed to live up to that by bringing forward its own respect pledge.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Meetings held in the evening often create a barrier to women entering politics, particularly local politics. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that women get appropriate time off work and are provided with childcare?

**Brandon Lewis:** A number of local authorities are looking at how they can vary their meeting times. The Local Government Association, the chairman of which I met just this morning, is looking at how it can advise local authorities on what they can do to encourage more participation. Some local authorities even pay for childcare; but ultimately, we have to make sure that people feel they can conduct themselves in public life with respect and have the space for proper, robust public debate.

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Government work with schools and universities to encourage more young women to get involved in standing for political office?

**Brandon Lewis:** Absolutely. Again, my right hon. Friend makes a good observation. It is important that we encourage people from all backgrounds, including women and young people, to feel that they can get involved and that there are opportunities to get involved, participate and contribute to public life. To do that, they need to feel safe in that environment, and that is largely down to the political parties delivering it.

**Laura Smith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): With local elections taking place in May, it is vital that we have a diverse set of councillors representing our communities. However, only 33% of councillors in England are women, which represents a rise of only 5% in the past 20 years. There is a clear contrast with progress in the House. Does the Minister agree that the progress in improving women's representation in local government has stalled? What are this Government doing to address that failing?

**Brandon Lewis:** One of the key things to having more women involved in local government is political parties encouraging more women to get involved. Conservative Members will certainly be doing that, and I hope the hon. Lady will join me in calling for these local elections to have a respect pledge—the Labour party should step

up and do that—to make sure that people feel they can have robust debate, but with respect. The Labour party has simply failed to do that.

**Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): Clearly, it is important to use the centenary of women's suffrage this year to encourage participation events across the country, including in my constituency and the north-west. What funding does the Minister have available to ensure that those types of events happen?

**Brandon Lewis**: My hon. Friend makes a good point. It is right in this year that we take the opportunity to continue to highlight why it is important that we see more people, particularly women, getting involved in public life. There is £5 million available, and I am sure that the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), will be happy to liaise with her on that. Again, I have to say that we all need to play a part in encouraging more people from diverse backgrounds to get involved and to feel free to get involved in politics.

#### Political Parties: Donations and Loans

4. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to ensure the transparency of donations and loans to political parties. [904621]

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith)**: Donations and loans to political parties are subject to transparency rules, as set out in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. The Government remain committed to such transparency, recently passing legislation to extend the requirements to donations and loans in Northern Ireland for the first time.

**Alex Cunningham**: In the light of recent revelations, how much of the hundreds of thousands of pounds donated to the Tory party by Russians will be returned?

**Chloe Smith**: The rules on donations are very clear in terms of permissibility and impermissibility: British citizens are entitled to donate to UK political parties and foreign donors are not.

**Mr Speaker**: We have a lot to get through. Quick sentences please.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Will my hon. Friend reissue the requirements that all political parties have to honour on donations, so that no one can fall foul of the rules?

**Chloe Smith**: I welcome my hon. Friend's reminder that we all simply have to abide by the law of this country.

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Earlier this month, the House approved regulations requiring the Electoral Commission to disclose donations for parties in Northern Ireland, but that was limited to events taking place after 1 July last year. Given the recent disclosures and in particular the allegations about dark money going from the Constitutional Research Council, which is linked to the Scottish Conservatives,

to the Democratic Unionist party, will the Minister consider bringing forward a new order to require the Electoral Commission to disclose information relating to the period from 2015?

**Chloe Smith**: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has been clear that, although she does not have any plans to provide for publication of the pre-2017 data, we will look to review the broader framework once those arrangements have bedded in. What I would say is that she and her predecessor took those decisions because the majority of parties in Northern Ireland agreed at the time that it was the right thing to do, and, indeed, the Labour Front Bench team, before it was against it, was for it.

**Jon Trickett** (Hemsworth) (Lab): Last month, access to members of the British Cabinet was auctioned off for around £55,000 per Minister—although the Secretary of State for International Trade was worth only £2,000. The Minister's job in the Cabinet Office is to ensure "propriety, ethics and transparency" in government; does she agree that auctioning off access to Ministers undermines confidence in democracy by giving the impression of a Government for sale? Will she take steps immediately to secure transparency and propriety in all such matters in future?

**Chloe Smith**: As I said in answer to a previous question, all donations are registered in accordance with the law. I appreciate that in recent days some points have been raised; indeed, some were raised in the Chamber yesterday, after your decision to grant an emergency debate, Mr Speaker. There are a lot of allegations in the air at the moment, but what the Government have to do is deal with the law as it stands and allow the correct bodies to carry out their investigations.

#### House of Lords Reform: Hereditary Peers

5. **David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): Whether he plans to reform hereditary peers' membership of the House of Lords. [904622]

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith)**: As our manifesto made clear, we will continue to ensure that the House of Lords remains relevant and effective by addressing issues such as its size and where there is consensus across both Houses for action. We acknowledge the ongoing work of the Burns Committee, which will consider the next steps on reducing the size of the House of Lords.

**David Hanson**: The Prime Minister wants to reduce the size of the House of Lords, so why not start with the 91 men and only one woman who owe their place there not to their intrinsic merit but to their ancestors? The House is due to debate my private Member's Bill on 27 April; the Minister could vote for it, or she could vote for Lord Grocott's Bill, which has been introduced in the other place. Why not do it?

**Chloe Smith**: I very much look forward to discussing the right hon. Gentleman's private Member's Bill with him and know that conversations are ongoing on this issue in the other place.

**Andrew Percy** (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Never mind the hereditaries, the House of Lords is stuffed full of people who are too London-centric. When are we going to have more Yorkshire folk and more of the good men and women of Lincolnshire in the House of Lords?

**Chloe Smith:** Very soon, I hope.

#### Government Procurement: Small Businesses

6. **Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the use of small businesses in Government procurement. [904623]

9. **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the use of small businesses in Government procurement. [904627]

11. **Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the use of small businesses in Government procurement. [904629]

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden):** Small businesses are the engine of our economy and we are determined that they should get their fair share of Government contracts, which is why we have set an ambitious aspiration for a third of procurement spend to be with small and medium-sized enterprises by 2022. We will shortly announce further measures to help us to achieve that target.

**Rachel Maclean:** We understand that High Speed 2 will bring vast benefits to our economy in the west midlands, including £4 billion-worth of economic growth and 50,000 extra jobs, but small businesses in Redditch say to me that they are not sure how to bid for the contracts. What advice can the Minister give them?

**Oliver Dowden:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. Small businesses throughout the country create millions of jobs and it is important that they are able to access large contracts such as HS2. Public sector contracts are advertised on the Contracts Finder website, which is free and easy to use, and bidders can request information as they need it. I encourage businesses in my hon. Friend's constituency and elsewhere to take advantage.

**Stephen Metcalfe:** As my hon. Friend will know, small businesses are the backbone of the UK economy. It is the Government's responsibility to make sure that they can compete equally for public sector contracts. Will my hon. Friend tell the House what he is doing to level the playing field?

**Oliver Dowden:** We are constantly looking into new ways to reduce the barriers to small businesses working with the public sector, which is why we have already scrapped complex pre-qualification questionnaires for low-value contracts. We require public sector buyers to split contracts into accessible chunks for small businesses, and I am pleased to confirm that we will reopen the G-Cloud to new suppliers, which will further help small businesses.

**Mr Speaker:** We are very short of time. I sometimes think we have time for the questions but not always for the answers. We need to be pretty dextrous about this.

**Mike Wood:** Small businesses in Dudley South have shown that they can compete with the biggest names in the world. Will the Minister help them to compete for Government contracts by publishing all contracts worth more than £10,000 on the Contracts Finder website?

**Oliver Dowden:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and all contracts worth more than £10,000 are published on the Contracts Finder website. Indeed, more than 25,000 organisations are currently registered with Contracts Finder, of which 64% are small and medium-sized enterprises.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Public procurement was meant to be one of the Brexit dividends, but it is not going very well with the Passport Office. Will the Minister tell us specifically what will change?

**Oliver Dowden:** I have to say to the hon. Lady that, as we leave Europe, it is important that we remain an open economy, and I have every confidence in the way in which that procurement was conducted. We should be sending a signal that, just as we expect foreign businesses to be able to bid for contracts here, we have an open system in this country.

**Derek Twigg** (Halton) (Lab): I hear that the problem for small businesses is that they are often denied the chance to bid for work, because they are told by various people that it is down to Government procurement rules, so local businesses, in particular, are kept out. What more is the Minister doing to ensure that local businesses get local contracts?

**Oliver Dowden:** It is very important that local businesses can get local contracts. The first thing that the Cabinet Office is doing is ensuring that as we re-let contracts, we split them into small amounts so that they are easier for small businesses to bid for, and we have extensive engagement before we let the contract to ensure that as wide a range of businesses as possible can access it.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): In Brazil, 30% of food for school meals has to be sourced from local or family farms. France has just introduced a similar law on local, organic provision in public procurement. Why can we not do it here?

**Oliver Dowden:** I know the hon. Lady's commitment to this cause. As a result of the changes made under this Government, we allow contracts to take into account factors such as the local sourcing of food, as long as it is provided to all businesses.

#### Topical Questions

T1. [904647] **Mr Gary Streeter** (South West Devon) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington):** Today we are publishing the Government's state of the estate report for 2016-17. That report demonstrates the progress that we have made in transforming the use of the estate and in freeing up property receipts of £620 million to be reinvested in supporting local and national services.

**Mr Streeter:** We live in a London-centric country. Can my right hon. Friend update the House on what he is doing to ensure that Government Departments are relocated to other parts of the United Kingdom, including, of course, the great south-west?

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden):** This Government are committed to locating economic activity outside London and the south-east. Since 2016, 12 new public bodies have been located outside London, and indeed in the south-west to which my hon. Friend refers. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has set up a regional centre in Bristol, which employs 1,600 people.

T4. [904650] **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): An RNIB report on the general election of 2017 shockingly found that one in four blind and partially sighted people were unable to vote independently and in secret. With just five weeks to go until the upcoming local elections, what steps are the Government taking to ensure that blind and partially sighted people can vote independently and in secret?

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith):** There are already measures in place. For example, there are improvements to the way that the certificate of visual impairment can be shared with local authorities. I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss this further.

T2. [904648] **Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): Perhaps an apt question for Spy Wednesday is: what more can be done to ensure cyber-security across our public sector?

**Oliver Dowden:** My hon. Friend raises a very important point. Cyber-security is a major priority for the whole of this Government, and our world-leading national cyber security strategy is supported by almost £2 billion of investment. It sets out measures to ensure that the public sector, and the wider economy, is cyber-secure.

T5. [904651] **Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Yesterday, the Government called time on business in the House two hours early. Meanwhile, important Bills such as the draft Public Service Ombudsman Bill languishes in purgatory. My constituents are desperate for this Bill to be debated as it pertains to the AEA Technology pensions debacle. Will the Minister please push for this Bill to be sent to the Floor of the House?

**Mr Lidington:** These matters are always the subject of keen discussion between the business managers of all political parties. I am sure that the hon. Lady will encourage her party's spokesman to make those representations.

T3. [904649] **Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What progress is my right hon. Friend's Department making on tackling the issues raised in the racial disparity audit?

**Mr Lidington:** Two weeks ago the Prime Minister launched a £90 million programme to help to tackle inequalities in youth unemployment. That is in addition to targeted employment support already under way in 20 areas across the United Kingdom.

T6. [904652] **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Jess Leigh from my constituency is one of the many campaigners for votes at 16. At what stage are the Government going to see sense and extend the franchise by introducing votes at 16?

**Mr Lidington rose—**

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith):** My right hon. Friend and I are both so keen to answer that question that we are vying to do so.

The Conservative party manifesto was quite clear that we shall not be doing that, and it was that manifesto that won the general election.

T7. [904653] **Dr Sarah Wollaston** (Totnes) (Con): Victims of the contaminated blood scandal have waited—  
[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. There is far too much noise in the Chamber. I was always taught that you should listen to a doctor. The hon. Lady is a doctor so the House should listen to her, particularly when she is talking about contaminated blood, which is a very serious matter.

**Dr Wollaston:** The victims of the contaminated blood scandal have waited decades for answers. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on progress on the inquiry? Is there any room to revisit the decision to deny victims and their families legal aid in order to prepare adequately for the inquiry?

**Mr Lidington:** The inquiry launched a consultation on its terms of reference on 2 March. Details are on its website. The deadline for responses is 26 April. Sir Brian Langstaff wants to hear from as many of those who were affected as possible. As with any such inquiry, it is for the inquiry to decide the level of financial support, including for legal representation for the inquiry proceedings. I am very happy to talk to my hon. Friend and other interested colleagues, or for the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), to do so, about how the terms of reference are being handled. Sir Brian wants this process to be as user-friendly as possible.

T8. [904654] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): Will the Minister look at extending the balanced scorecard approach of public procurement to schools and hospitals?

**Oliver Dowden:** As the hon. Lady will be aware, we have invested in the balanced scorecard approach. Of course, we will look at extending it to whatever procurements are possible.

**Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Ministers talk a lot about voter fraud, even though there were only two convictions in 2016. Ministers do not talk about the 6 million people who are not on the electoral register. May I have a commitment from Ministers that, when it comes to strengthening our democracy, they will prioritise the many, not the few?

**Chloe Smith:** The hon. Gentleman is unaware that the number of people on his own constituency's electoral register rose, according to Office for National Statistics figures released last week.

**Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): What conversations has the Minister had with charities and health workers about raising awareness of changes to anonymous voter registration for victims of domestic abuse?

**Chloe Smith:** I really welcome this question, as it gives us an opportunity to remind health workers and the professionals throughout our constituencies who can now help with this. For example, the Royal College of Midwives, with Government support, recently released such guidance.

## PRIME MINISTER

*The Prime Minister was asked—*

### Engagements

Q1. [904632] **Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 28 March.

**The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May):** May I start, Mr Speaker, by wishing you, all Members and everyone who works on the parliamentary estate a very happy Easter?

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

**Mike Wood:** Under Conservative leadership since last May, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council has protected social care and other core services. Will the Prime Minister reject the calls from the Opposition to scrap the council tax referendum lock, which prevents excessive council tax rises?

**The Prime Minister:** I am very happy to agree with my hon. Friend, who raises an important point. He also makes a point about the success of Dudley Council under Conservative leadership. People living in the Conservative-led Dudley Council area pay among the lowest council tax in the west midlands. Since taking control from Labour, the council has reversed Labour's street cleaning cuts, scrapped its plans to charge for green waste collection and maintained the weekly bin collection. It is very clear that if people want to pay less and get good services, they should vote Conservative on 3 May.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in wishing you, Mr Speaker, all Members of the House, and indeed our entire community, a very happy Easter.

This week is Autism Awareness Week, and I welcome the work of the National Autistic Society and others. I hope the whole House will join me in paying tribute to the families of Connor Sparrowhawk and Teresa Colvin for their dignity in campaigning for answers about the deaths of their loved ones at the hands of Southern

Health. Last week, the health service ombudsman said that too many patients suffered

“failings in mental health care”

involving

“violations of the most basic human rights of patients.”

How confident is the Prime Minister that deaths like Connor's and Teresa's could not happen today?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. First of all, significant steps have been taken in raising awareness of autism and ensuring that there is support available for those who are on the autistic spectrum, but the very sad deaths of Teresa Colvin and Connor Sparrowhawk raise very real questions. I join him in paying tribute to the families for the way in which they have campaigned on this particular issue. Obviously these incidents took place some time ago, and lessons have been learned by the health and social care system as a result of the failings of Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust. The Government are supporting NHS providers to be open and to learn from mistakes so that they reduce the risks to future patients and prevent tragedies from happening. A comprehensive Care Quality Commission inspection of Southern Health is expected later this year.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** The ombudsman, Rob Behrens, also said that

“there aren't enough skilled and qualified staff, there is a problem in recruiting them and there is an overuse of agency staff”,

so could the Prime Minister explain why there are 5,000 fewer mental health nurses than there were in 2010?

**The Prime Minister:** As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we have already committed to improving mental health services on the ground. We are putting extra money into mental health services. I am pleased to say that about 1,400 more people are accessing mental health services every day compared with when we came into power. And of course it is this Government who have ensured that we have given parity of esteem to the treatment of mental health in the national health service and are increasing the training and recruitment of people to provide those mental health services. This is about the NHS; it is also about services in our communities; and it is also about ensuring that we can intervene at an early stage for those young people who develop mental health problems. That is why I was pleased to launch the initiative for there to be training in schools so that there is a member of staff who is able to identify mental health problems and able to ensure that young people get the support they need.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** The Health and Social Care Act 2012 did indeed embed parity of esteem in law, thanks to a Labour amendment introduced in the House of Lords—but sadly the money never followed. The charity Rethink Mental Illness said recently that

“our overstretched services are failing”.

ITV's Project 84 campaign highlights the horrifying figure that male suicide is the biggest killer of men under 45, with 84 taking their lives every week. Earlier this month, the Health Secretary said:

“The prime minister and I have made mental health services a personal priority”.

I fully acknowledge and accept the Prime Minister's very genuine concern about mental health, but mental health trusts have got fewer resources. Why does the analysis by the Royal College of Psychiatrists show that mental health trusts have £105 million less than they had six years ago?

**The Prime Minister:** As I have just said, of course dealing with mental health is not just a question of what is happening inside the health service; there are wider areas of responsibility for dealing with mental health. What have we done on mental health? Yes, parity of esteem is there. As I said, 1,400 more people are accessing mental health services every day compared with when we came into power. Spending on mental health has increased to a record £11.6 billion, with a further £1 billion by 2020-21. We are ensuring that we are putting more money in. We have responded to the report of the Stevenson/Farmer review of mental health in the workplace. *[Interruption.]* It is all very well Labour Members chuntering about this, but dealing with mental health means addressing it in a variety of ways. We are taking more steps to address the issues of mental health than the Labour Government ever took when they were in power.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Mental health spending fell by £600 million between 2010 and 2015. Far too often, a mental health crisis has to be dealt with by police, friends, neighbours or people in the community, and too many of our fellow citizens suffer alone because there are insufficient staff to help them at a moment of crisis. It is quite clear that the mental health budget is insufficient. The Prime Minister mentioned young people. Can she explain why only 6% of the overall mental health budget is spent on children and young people when they make up 20% of our population?

**The Prime Minister:** As I have just said, we are in fact increasing the services that are available to children and young people, but this is not just about what happens in NHS trusts. It is important we look at this in the round. That is why we are ensuring that there is training in schools to help young people. We have committed to ensuring that 70,000 more children and young people each year have access to high-quality NHS mental health care by 2020-21. We have backed those proposals by additional funding for the work we are doing in schools and how they deal with children and young people's mental health.

We are also taking action in other areas. When I was Home Secretary, one of the issues I saw was the fact that the police found it very difficult to deal with people in mental health crises because they did not have the training to do it. Putting those people, including young people, into a cell overnight was not helping them. We have changed that. We have seen a dramatic reduction in that number, and we have made it clear that young people will never be taken to a police cell as a place of safety.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** I fully acknowledge the work the police do in helping people in a mental health crisis. My point is that there should be more mental health professionals to help people in a crisis. Half of all enduring mental health conditions materialise before the age of 14. Spending on child and adolescent mental health should be a priority. Instead, sadly, the number

of child and adolescent psychiatrists has fallen by 6.3%. Fully staffing our children's and young people's mental health has to be a priority.

**The Prime Minister:** I am not aware that there was a question at the end of that, but I will repeat the point. Young people's mental health is a very serious issue; the right hon. Gentleman is focusing on one aspect. That is why we are ensuring that we start to address this at an earlier stage. He is right about the high proportion of mental health problems that start before somebody is 14. That is exactly why we are doing more in our schools and working to ensure that we have training for teachers.

There is a wider issue here, which I am sure everybody in the House will recognise. When I talk to young people who have developed mental health problems and hear about the problems they are facing, sadly, one of the issues that puts increasing pressure on young people's mental health today is the use of social media and the bullying and harassment that they get on it. I hope the right hon. Gentleman will join me in saying that we need both to help our young people to have greater resilience in dealing with that social media bullying and to ensure that social media is not used in a way that leads to mental health problems that could well be with those young people for the rest of their lives.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** I hope, in the light of what the Prime Minister just said, that she will support our digital bill of rights, which will ensure that there are proper protections for people.

A young woman wrote to me this week who has been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder and is regarded as a high suicide risk. She was told to wait three months for an appointment. That was cancelled and she had to wait a further three months. It is very hard to explain to someone why they have to wait all those months for an appointment while they are in a desperate situation.

Mental health affects us all, and it is welcome that there is now much less stigma surrounding it. However, our NHS is in crisis, and the crisis is particularly acute in mental health services. Despite legislating for parity of esteem, the Government have failed to fund it. We have fewer resources for mental health trusts, fewer mental health nurses and fewer child and adolescent psychiatrists. Will the Prime Minister commit to ring-fencing the NHS mental health budget to support those going through a mental health crisis, at a time when they most need our help and our support?

**The Prime Minister:** The national health service is receiving extra funding from this Government—extra funding for mental health and extra funding for other services. Since November, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced that an extra £10 billion is going into our NHS over the next few years. How are we able to do that? We are able to do that because we take a balanced approach to our economy. That means keeping our debts down, ensuring that we are investing in our public services such as the NHS and mental health services, and actually keeping taxes down for ordinary working people. Labour's approach would mean increased debt, less money for mental health services and higher taxes for working people—and ordinary working people would pay the price of Labour.

Q2. [904633] **Peter Heaton-Jones** (North Devon) (Con): May I commend my right hon. Friend for getting on with Brexit? Nearly 60% of voters in North Devon voted to leave. Rather than dismissing them as old people yearning for a world of white faces, should we not respect their decision, and get on and deliver it?

**The Prime Minister:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend: we need to get on and deliver Brexit, recognising the vote that was taken. It is a pity that we have seen from the Labour party a track record of trying to frustrate Brexit, rather than trying to make it work. Its MEPs voted against our moving on the negotiations via the European Parliament; the Opposition voted against the Bill that will give us a smooth withdrawal from the EU; and they oppose us spending money to prepare for our exit. It is the Conservatives in government who are getting on and delivering for the voters of North Devon.

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): The public must have trust in our political process. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that transparency in political campaign spending and the integrity of electoral laws across the UK must be upheld, and will she join me in saying that all allegations of improper spending during the EU referendum must be fully investigated?

**The Prime Minister:** We have laws about election spending, and parties are required to abide by those laws. I understand that any allegations that have come forward in respect of spending during the referendum have already been investigated by the Electoral Commission, but it is of course right that allegations are investigated by the Electoral Commission.

**Ian Blackford:** We know that before the EU referendum the Democratic Unionist party received £425,000 from the Conservative-run Constitutional Research Council, chaired by Richard Cook, the former vice-chair of the Scottish Tories. We know that some of that money was given to Aggregate IQ, a reported franchise of Cambridge Analytica. We know that Chris Wylie is “absolutely convinced” of a common purpose between Vote Leave, BeLeave, Veterans for Britain and the DUP. The shady business of data mining and undermining electoral laws goes right to the heart of the Prime Minister’s party. Will the Prime Minister issue the full details of the transactions between the DUP and the Scottish Tory-linked CRC?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman refers to the issue of Vote Leave. As I have just said, I understand that this matter has already been investigated twice by the Electoral Commission. He raises questions about inquiries. If there is an allegation of criminal activity, that should be taken to the police. The regulator of election spending is the Electoral Commission, so if there is an allegation of breaches of campaign spending or campaign funding rules, that should be taken to the Electoral Commission. My understanding is that the Electoral Commission does indeed investigate these and will continue to do so when allegations are brought to its attention.

Q4. [904635] **Trudy Harrison** (Copeland) (Con): Outstanding staff dedication, the passion of my community and ambitious leadership have secured huge Government

investment and nationally celebrated excellence. Does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agree that when the department is fully staffed, 24/7 consultant-led maternity services will be secured?

**The Prime Minister:** This is an issue on which my hon. Friend has campaigned strong and hard in the interests of her constituents. The NHS in north Cumbria is working on plans for considerable investment in local health services, including the completion of the new build at West Cumberland Hospital and the creation of an academic campus. It is committed to doing all it can to maintain consultant-led maternity services at West Cumberland Hospital. Patient safety is the priority, and the NHS is doing all it can to ensure that a safe and sustainable service can be provided to her constituents and to others.

Q3. [904634] **Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): There are some beautiful stately homes in this country, but our heritage is equally about the history of working people. Shortly, the all-party parliamentary group on industrial heritage, which I chair, will publish its report into how best we can use that great industrial past for the jobs of the future. Will the Prime Minister meet me to discuss how best we can implement its recommendations?

**The Prime Minister:** I would like, first, to look at the report that the hon. Gentleman’s group is providing. What he is saying would potentially fit into the modern industrial strategy that the Government have already launched. We want to build on the strengths of our economy, but also to ensure that people in the UK are skilled for the jobs of the future. I am happy to look at the report and to ensure that he can meet me or the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to look at the results.

Q8. [904639] **David Morris** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): The investigative reporter, Patrick Christys, has uncovered questions over serious data breaches by Labour headquarters. The Information Commissioner has been notified. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister join me in asking the Information Commissioner to do a thorough investigation?

**The Prime Minister:** As I have said before in this House, it is important that people can have confidence in how their personal data is used and that the Information Commissioner is able to investigate cases that are drawn to her attention. The Data Protection Bill will strengthen the law in this area. We will give the Information Commissioner’s Office tougher provisions to ensure that organisations comply with its investigations. At the heart of the digital charter that we have set out is the principle that personal data should be respected and used appropriately.

Q5. [904636] **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): According to the National Audit Office, local councils have had their funding cut by a massive 49.1% since 2010. Children’s services up and down the country are on their knees, a Tory council has gone bust and the gap nationally is £5.8 billion. When will the Prime Minister wake up to this crisis made in Downing Street?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman talks about funding for local councils. Of course, we have heard in the announcements by my right hon. Friend the Secretary

of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government that more money is going into local councils over the next couple of years. If the hon. Gentleman worries about what is happening at local council level, he ought to look at the figures that have come out today, which show very clearly that if you live in an area where the council is run by the Labour party, you pay £100 more than under the Conservatives.

Q10. [904641] **Chris Philp** (Croydon South) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me in welcoming the recent figures that show that last year the number of first-time home buyers hit a 10-year record high of 359,000? Does she agree that last year's stamp duty cut and the extension of Help to Buy played an important part in that? Does she agree that promoting home ownership, as Margaret Thatcher did, will remain a central part of the Government's policy?

**The Prime Minister:** I am very happy to confirm to my hon. Friend that promoting home ownership remains a central part of this Government's policy. We are also introducing a number of measures that will help people who rent their properties. I am pleased, as he said, that the number of first-time buyers has reached its highest level for—he said 10 years, but I think it is 11 years. Of course it is important that we provide funding for Help to Buy, but that cut in stamp duty was also important. The Labour party sometimes talks about homes, but which party was it that voted against that cut in stamp duty? The Labour party.

Q6. [904637] **Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab): I asked my constituents what they would like me to ask. They overwhelmingly said how can the Prime Minister justify that from next week families in poverty, earning just £145 a week, are expected to find £10 per week for each of their children to eat a nutritious school dinner, while Members of this House, earning 10 times—*[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I do not care how long it takes—I have all the time in the world—but the question will be heard and the answer will be heard. That applies to every single answer and question in this Chamber, no matter how long it takes.

**Ruth George:** Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. To conclude my question, I was asking about families earning just £145 a week not receiving school dinners for their children while Members of this House, earning 10 times that sum, are subject to subsidised catering from the taxpayer.

**The Prime Minister:** I hope the hon. Lady was not implying that anybody who is currently in receipt of a free school meal will have that taken away from them, because they will not. They will not. She talks about changes that are happening next week. Yes, we will see pensioners getting a boost to their pension next week, 31 million income tax payers will get an income tax cut and 2 million people living on the national living wage will get a pay rise. That is Conservatives delivering for everyone.

Q12. [904643] **Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): Today is the most exciting day on which I have ever got to my feet in this House. The Government have today made an announcement that will improve the lives of every single

one of my constituents in Telford. Today, the Government have announced a £312 million investment in new hospital services in our area. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister join me in welcoming this fantastic news and the benefits it will bring to Telford? Will she also very kindly wish everyone in Telford a very happy Easter?

**The Prime Minister:** I am very happy to wish everyone in Telford, and indeed around the country, a very happy Easter. I am very pleased to welcome, as my hon. Friend has done, the considerable investment announced by the NHS in the hospital that serves her constituents. This is another example of how all we ever hear from the Labour party is the NHS being done down in funding terms, when what we see on the ground is more money coming into the NHS, improving services and serving constituents.

Q7. [904638] **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Last Sunday, thousands of Iraqi Christians and Yazidis walked through the Nineveh Plains in northern Iraq to celebrate Palm Sunday. They have not done that for six years. That is welcome, as Iraqi Christians are one of the most persecuted religious groups in the world. All Christians celebrate Christ's resurrection this weekend. Will the Prime Minister pledge her support to help persecuted Christians around the world?

**The Prime Minister:** Easter is of course the most important time in the Christian calendar. It is a time of new life and hope. The message of the cross and the resurrection help to support Christians around the world. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the very real persecution faced by too many Christians around the world. I was pleased to meet recently Father Daniel from Nineveh and Idlib, who talked about the very real persecution suffered by his congregations. He presented me with a bible that had been burned after a church had been set on fire. It was rescued and is now in No. 10 Downing Street. We stand with those persecuted Christians. We will be looking to see what more the Government can do to support them.

Q13. [904644] **Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): Adverse childhood experiences include domestic abuse, sexual abuse, parental separation and living with an alcoholic, to name but a few. According to Public Health England, adults who experience four or more of these in their childhood are severely at risk of mental health problems, suicide, incarceration and violent tendencies. Will the Prime Minister commission a national review not only to enable social mobility, but to help save thousands of lives?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend raises a very important point. This is why, when we look at the issue of mental health problems and mental health difficulties for young people, we need to look widely at the ways in which those problems can be caused and at the origins of those problems. She is right that the sort of abuse that she referred to can have a very terrible effect on the mental health of young people.

On my hon. Friend's specific point, our Green Paper on transforming children's mental health services proposes the establishment of new mental health support teams, who will be there, managed by schools, colleges and the

NHS. One of the issues that they will particularly look at is supporting young people who have experienced trauma. She has identified a number of cases where those young people may experience that trauma. This is important: it is about young people's futures.

**Q9.** [904640] **Ged Killen** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): LGBT rights in Northern Ireland are in limbo. The Assembly has already voted for equal marriage and public support for it is overwhelming. Will the Prime Minister stop hiding behind the Democratic Unionist party and take this opportunity to put on record her support for the Bill being brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn)?

**The Prime Minister:** I hope that the hon. Gentleman recognises this Government's record in relation to LGBT rights. We have taken up and championed the issue. He will find that previous legislation—I think actually under the previous Labour Government—ensured that it would be dealt with as a devolved matter, and we hope that a Northern Ireland Executive will be in place soon and be able to address these issues.

**Q14.** [904645] **Craig Mackinlay** (South Thanet) (Con): The people of Ramsgate face an uncertain future regarding their dental care. NHS England South East has entered into a five-year contract with Kent Community Health NHS Foundation Trust to run Church Hill dental practice, serving 8,000 patients. That contract comes to an end this Saturday; the practice will close and there is no replacement in place. Will my right hon. Friend encourage the appropriate commissioners to work with me to find an urgent solution?

**The Prime Minister:** I am sure that my hon. Friend's working with those who are looking for a solution will be important and welcomed. I understand that when Church Hill dental practice closes, NHS England will be working with other dental practices in the area to ensure that services are available and that they can increase their capacity. A wider piece of work is being undertaken about dental services in east Kent—the needs and provision of those services—and I am sure, as I say, that my hon. Friend's contribution to that will be welcomed.

**Q11.** [904642] **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Foreign Secretary was the figurehead for the Vote Leave campaign and the Environment Secretary was co-convenor. Their campaign director, Dominic Cummings, is quoted on the AggregatIQ website as saying that

“the Vote Leave campaign owes a great deal of its success to the work of AggregatIQ. We couldn't have done it without them.”

How does the Prime Minister feel about her Ministers being caught red-handed using immoral data-mining techniques?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman makes certain claims in that question that I did not recognise. I simply say this: if there are those who are trying to suggest that the Government should be rejecting the result of the referendum as a result of these sorts of claims, I say to them very clearly that the referendum was held—[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Calm yourself, Mr Brown. I know you were obviously a very popular figure when you rose to ask your question, but you must listen to the answer—my dear chap, patience.

**The Prime Minister:** As I was saying, the referendum was held, the vote was taken, the people gave their view and we will be delivering on it.

**Q15.** [904646] **Edward Argar** (Charnwood) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the fantastic Welbeck Defence Sixth Form College in Woodhouse in my constituency. It equips young people planning a career in our armed forces with the skills they need to help to defend this country in the 21st century. Will the Prime Minister confirm that we will continue to invest in strong defences for our country, so that those young people can play their full part in the future in the best armed forces in the world?

**The Prime Minister:** I join my hon. Friend in recognising the work that is done by the Welbeck Defence Sixth Form College in his constituency and the skills that it gives young people who wish to enter the armed forces, but he raises an important point about funding in relation to our armed forces. I can announce today that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and I have agreed that the Ministry of Defence will have access to £600 million this coming financial year for the MOD's Dreadnought submarine programme. Today's announcement will ensure that the work to rebuild the UK's new world-class nuclear submarines remains on schedule, and it is another sign of the deep commitment this Government have to keeping our country safe. Along with the £200 million carry-forward agreed at the supplementary estimates, that means that the MOD will benefit from an extra £800 million in the next financial year. We continue to exceed the NATO 2% target and remain the second biggest defence spender in NATO.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Cambridge Analytica revelations suggest that there is something rotten in the state—[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. This is very unseemly. [*Interruption.*] No, I am sorry, it is very unseemly. The hon. Lady—[*Interruption.*] Mr Pound, your expertise in gesticulation is well known to all Members of the House, but it is not required to be on display at this time. Caroline Lucas will be heard.

**Caroline Lucas:** The Cambridge Analytica revelations suggest that there is something rotten in the state of our democracy. The current electoral law is woefully inadequate at dealing with the combination of big money and big data, so will the Prime Minister commit to urgent cross-party talks to kick-start a process to ensure that we have a regulatory and legal framework that is up to the challenge of dealing with the digital age?

**The Prime Minister:** As I have said previously, clearly the allegations relating to Cambridge Analytica are concerning, because people should be able to have confidence about how their personal data is being used. It is right that we are seeing the Information Commissioner investigating this matter. I expect Facebook, Cambridge

Analytica and any others involved to co-operate fully with the Information Commissioner's Office in the investigation that is taking place. As I said earlier, our Data Protection Bill will strengthen the powers of the Information Commissioner, but it will also strengthen legislation around data protection, as will the other steps that the Government are taking—for example, through our digital charter. This is a Government who are committing to making sure that this is a safe place to be online.

**Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con):** Would the Prime Minister confirm her reported opinion that we are highly unlikely to introduce a new hard border between Britain and Europe by December 2020? Presumably it could take years to train thousands of customs officers and build new lorry parks and other infrastructure at Dover, Holyhead and elsewhere if we tried to, so will she confirm her strongly preferred policy option of frictionless trade in future between the EU and the United Kingdom and an open border in Ireland, in conformity with the Good Friday agreement, and seek a customs arrangement that I personally hope will resemble the existing customs union very closely indeed?

**The Prime Minister:** I say to my right hon. and learned Friend that we are indeed committed. We have given that commitment—we gave it in the December joint report and we have given it in the negotiating stage that was completed last week—to ensure that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and also to ensure that businesses in Northern Ireland can continue to trade freely with the rest of the United Kingdom and vice versa. We are working to ensure that we have tariff-free trade and trade that is as frictionless as possible. As I am sure he will know, trade between the UK and the EU is not completely frictionless today, but we will ensure that trade is as frictionless as possible in the future. We have put forward proposals and we have started discussing them in detail with the European Commission, and I assure my right hon. and learned Friend that the Home Secretary and others are taking the steps necessary to ensure that we have the arrangements in place for when we come to the end of the implementation period.

**Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab):** It has been four weeks since the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse published a damning report about the treatment of British children sent overseas by their Government. They were physically, sexually and emotionally abused, separated from siblings and wrongly told that their families were dead. Successive Governments suppressed information, ignored warnings and continued to send children to harm for decades. The report is unequivocal that compensation is owed and that this is now urgent. Many have died and others are dying, but in the last four weeks the Government have failed to issue a response, to set out any timetable for a response or even to agree which Department is responsible for formulating a response. The Prime Minister commissioned this report. Will she now get a grip on her Government, stand by its verdict and ensure that no more have to die waiting for justice?

**The Prime Minister:** I did indeed commission the work that is being done in looking at the treatment of children and the abuse of children in the past. I think

that that was important. I said at the time that I thought that many people would be shocked by some of the results, including, obviously, the issue of former child migrants to which the hon. Lady has referred.

I can confirm that the Department of Health and Social Care is responsible for policy on former child migrants. As the hon. Lady will know, we have funded the Child Migrants Trust since 1990 so that it can expand its work in seeking resolution for former child migrants and their families. It has received more than £7 million, and in the 1990s we provided £1 million for travel to help former child migrants to be reunited with their families. At the time of the Government's formal national apology to former child migrants in 2010, an £8 million family restoration fund was established.

**Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con):** Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the young British artist Hannah Rose Thomas and the charity Open Doors? Together they organised the current exhibition in our Upper Waiting Hall to draw attention to the plight of Yazidi women, 3,000 of whom are still in captivity and subject to some form of the slavery that my right hon. Friend has fought so hard to combat.

**The Prime Minister:** I am very happy to welcome this awareness-raising exhibition, and to commend Hannah Rose Thomas and others who have been involved in bringing the plight of the Yazidi women to the attention of the House and those visiting the House. I know that people felt horror and consternation when they first saw the treatment of the Yazidis, particularly Yazidi women, which is, of course, continuing. As my right hon. Friend says, we must not forget, and we must do everything we can to ensure that those women are freed from what is, as she says, a life of slavery in many cases.

**Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP):** Children at Canal View primary school in Wester Hailes, in my constituency, have just won the ultimate school trip competition, with the prize of a holiday to Mallorca next month. There is just one problem. One of their classmates is a Syrian refugee, and he has been told by the Home Office that he cannot travel with his friends because he does not have the proper documents. The Home Office says that it will take three months for those documents to come through. Will the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary help me to cut through the red tape so that this wee boy can go with his friends to enjoy the holiday of a lifetime?

**The Prime Minister:** I congratulate the primary school on winning the competition. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has heard what the hon. and learned Lady has said, and will look into the case.

**Mr Speaker:** Good.

**Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con):** As the Prime Minister will know, the High Court today overturned a decision by the Parole Board to release the black-cab rapist John Worboys. Does she share my admiration for the brave victims who challenged that the decision in court, does she agree that they should never have had to do so, and does she agree that this gigantic, landmark decision must now provoke a rethink of a criminal justice system in which many of us no longer have confidence?

**The Prime Minister:** Let me say first that I have the greatest sympathy with all those who were victims of Worboys, and I know that the sympathies of the whole House will be with them as well in the light of what they have suffered as a result of his horrific crimes.

I welcome today's judgment which found in favour of the brave victims who brought this legal action. The court's findings give rise to serious concerns, and it is right that my right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary will be making a statement shortly. One of those findings is that it is unlawful to impose a blanket prohibition on the disclosure of Parole Board information. My right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary had already been looking into that, and has made it clear that he will ensure that it is dealt with as soon as possible. The decision will now revert to the Parole Board, but the evidence that the board has will be updated, and it will take account of the findings of the court. My hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) is right to say that the case gives rise to serious concerns, and my right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary will set out the next steps to be taken in his statement later today.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** I call Jack Dromey, who I trust will speak with his legendary succinctness.

**Jack Dromey** (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Some 259 years of GKN history will be decided in the next 24 hours—a hostile takeover, not in the British national interest, that the Government have powers to block. May I ask the Prime Minister this? Disturbing evidence has come to light of a hedge fund scam to buy shares in GKN while avoiding paying tax on shares that will determine the future of GKN. Will she agree to condemn this outrageous practice and investigate as a matter of urgency?

**The Prime Minister:** As the hon. Gentleman knows, this is primarily a commercial decision for GKN. My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary is in discussion with the parties on an impartial basis and has sought reassurance from them on their plans. If the hon. Gentleman has evidence that illegal activity has taken place, that should be reported to the proper authorities.

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): The first words of the Speaker's Chaplain this afternoon repeated Jesus's instruction to love others.

I hope that the Prime Minister and leaders of Opposition parties will help to protect Jews from anti-Semitism and Muslims from Islamophobia.

If the police, the Crown Prosecution Service, the Home Office and others fail to have an independent inquiry into the recent prosecution of Gurpal Viridi, a Sikh, will the Prime Minister please meet me to discuss the matter?

**The Prime Minister:** I know that this is a case that my hon. Friend has taken up and championed for some time, and I believe that he and I have met and discussed it previously. Obviously, I am willing to meet him to discuss the case again. On my hon. Friend's wider point, there should be a very clear message from all of us in the House that there is no place for racial hatred or hate crime in our society. That should not be part of our society—whether it is Islamophobia or anti-Semitism. That is something we should all stand up against and do our best to eradicate from our society.

**Mr Speaker:** I am sure that we all agree that the Speaker's Chaplain is an example of love, compassion and empathy from which we can all benefit.

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Shortly, I will be meeting workers from De La Rue in my constituency who are visiting the House today. Will the Prime Minister give the House an assurance that no decision or announcement will be made on the passport contract until after the recess, so that the House may discuss the issue?

**The Prime Minister:** This House did, of course, discuss the issue earlier this week during an urgent question to my right hon. Friend the Immigration Minister. I understand that the final decision has not been taken but that a preferred bidder has been announced. There is then a proper process that gives a length of time, as I understand it, for challenges to be brought forward by others in the process. The Home Office is following exactly the right process to ensure that we have secure passports produced on a basis that gives good value to the taxpayer.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): The Government inspector's report into Northamptonshire County Council makes it crystal clear that there is no reason to further postpone the transfer of the fire service from the county council to the police and crime commissioner. Given that that enjoys popular support and the support of the county's seven MPs, and is essential to protect investment in the fire service and firefighters' jobs, will the Prime Minister instruct the Policing and Fire Minister to approve the transfer without delay?

**The Prime Minister:** As I think my hon. Friend knows, as Home Secretary I was long a champion of fire services being able to come under police and crime commissioners' areas of responsibility. Indeed, a former Conservative police and crime commissioner in Northamptonshire was one of the early proponents of that particular move. I have heard what my hon. Friend has said and will make sure that his comments are brought to the attention of the Policing and Fire Minister.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

## Kerslake Arena Attack Review

12.50 pm

**Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement on the Government's response to the Kerslake arena attack review.

**The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace)**: The horrific events that took place at the Manchester Arena on 22 May last year were an attack on the people of Manchester and further afield. All terrorist attacks are cowardly, but this was an appalling attack that deliberately targeted innocent people, many of them young, in which 22 people were killed and many more were injured. As a north-west MP, I feel the pain personally, as do many of us in this House who represent that region and who will have had friends and constituents there on that night.

The Mayor of Greater Manchester commissioned this independent review following the attack, focusing on the response to the attack and the nine days that followed it. The report rightly highlights the acts of bravery and compassion on the night of 22 May and in the following days. As Lord Kerslake noted yesterday, the response was overwhelmingly positive. He said that the investment that had been made locally and nationally on collaborative partnership and on planning and testing, including an exercise in the preceding months at the Trafford Centre, was demonstrated to the full, enabling a fast response to the attacks. We are indebted to the emergency services. As Lord Kerslake said later, there is a lot to be proud of in the response, both from the city region of Greater Manchester and from its emergency services. The benefits of investing in collaborative partnership and emergency planning were demonstrated to the full. He said that we should reflect that at critical points in the evening, key emergency personnel exercised sound judgment in an extremely stressful, chaotic and dangerous environment.

The report also shows the need for improvement in some areas, however. It is right that all those involved acknowledge where the report has identified the need for improvement. The review is extensive and makes many recommendations, which the Home Office and all other agencies concerned will consider carefully. Lord Kerslake puts the experience of the bereaved families, the injured and the others who were directly affected at the centre of the review, where they should be. We will ensure that, across Government, those recommendations concerning victims are fully considered. We continue to stand with the people of Manchester as they recover and rebuild following the horrendous attack last year, and our thoughts remain with those who were injured and with the families and friends of those who lost their lives.

**Lucy Powell**: I thank the Minister for his response. We all remember the horrific events at the Manchester Arena last May and, as ever, our thoughts are with the victims and their families, and with the heroic emergency services who responded with courage and bravery. The Kerslake review, set up by Mayor Andy Burnham to ensure that lessons could be learned, was published yesterday. The desire to put the families at the centre of the review sets a new precedent, and we thank each one of them for contributing to the report.

The review makes hard reading in parts, but it is heart-warming in others. There are clear lessons for Greater Manchester, and particularly for the fire service, which have all been accepted and are being acted on. There are also questions for the Government. The report makes it clear that national protocols in relation to terrorist incidents fail to recognise the fact that every incident is different, and that flexibility and judgment are needed. Indeed, had those in charge on the night not broken with protocol, we would be facing more challenging questions today. In part, this explains the serious failings of the fire service. Will the Government take those recommendations on board?

The emergency family hotline run by Vodafone on a Home Office contract completely failed the families. How will the Home Office ensure that this will not happen again? The review was scathing about the media intrusion faced by families in the immediate aftermath, despite the great work of our local media. Anyone watching last night's "Newsnight" will have been appalled by the story of Martyn Hett's family. Will the Government look again at the role of the media in such events and ensure that there is proper redress? Finally, it is clear that there is insufficient national support for the victims of such atrocities. Had it not been for unprecedented charitable giving by the public, many of the victims would have been left with little. Will the Government look into establishing a fund for the victims of such attacks? I hope that they will recognise the wider lessons of this review and that they will act on them.

**Mr Wallace**: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) for raising this important topic and giving Members on both sides of the House this opportunity to examine Lord Kerslake's findings. Operation Plato is effectively the definition of the type of incident that we saw on that terrible night, and I understand her concern about whether it was followed too rigidly. Operation Plato is predominantly a response to a marauding terrorist firearms attack, but it has never been solely and uniquely about that; it has also covered broader areas. It has always been about using pragmatism in responding, but unfortunately, on that night, one or two individuals were too rigid about the definition. We will of course look at that again. However, in the exercising and in the following events, such as London Bridge, which did not involve marauding terrorist firearms, Plato was still called. Furthermore, many Members will remember that Westminster Bridge was also a Plato call, even though no firearms were involved. So part of this is about the ability of leaders on the ground to take a pragmatic view and, as Lord Kerslake spotted in his report, many of the leaders on the night did the right things and made sure that they addressed the issues as they came about.

On the issue of Vodafone, following the publication of the report I have asked for a full understanding of Vodafone's responses and services. Before and after the event, the Vodafone contract has provided what has been required, but it failed on that night. The Home Secretary and others have sought direct assurances from the chief executive of Vodafone that it will take responsibility, and it has apologised. I have asked that, in future, Vodafone's service is always exercised alongside the other services when we plan for these events.

[Mr Wallace]

On the subject of media intrusion, the hon. Lady is absolutely right. I find it odd that some of the media that are today discussing the weaknesses in the response are the very organisations that were hounding my constituents and those of other Members, sometimes at the very moment of their bereavement. They should reflect strongly on that, and I support the recommendation in Lord Kerslake's report about what can be done to prevent that from happening again. It is simply unacceptable.

The hon. Lady raised the question of a victims' fund. We had a request for £1.1 million for the We Love Manchester appeal, and the Government have put in £1 million. I have visited the victims' liaison officer in Manchester about four times since the attack. Across all the attacks that we have unfortunately had in the past year, the response by Manchester to the victims—and the decision to have a much broader classification of who was a victim—has been second to none and should absolutely be commended. They are dealing with hundreds of people who have self-identified as being a victim either mentally or physically, and the work that they have put into liaising with them has been absolutely brilliant. That has been part of why the Government have helped to respond to Manchester's central request.

I hear the hon. Lady's call about the generality of a policy to recognise victims, and I shall take that away and reflect on it. I can assure her, however, that I know from talking to the Mayor of Manchester, to the police liaison and to her colleagues that we are very much involved in ensuring that the victims are central to all of this. I have a great deal of respect for the Mayor of Manchester, whose experience in representing victims across the board in this House is second to none. I am keen to learn from him, and I talk to him as much as I can. We are here to help with the victims.

A key issue is that the victims of this attack were, regrettably, spread far and wide across the north of England, and indeed the highlands of Scotland. One of the challenges has been that engaging mental health help has involved people not only in Manchester but throughout Lancashire and in the highlands and islands of Scotland. That has now been done successfully but perhaps not as quickly as it could have been. That is one of the lessons to be learned. We have also needed to raise awareness in the schools of the teenagers who were targeted, by getting further into the detail and getting headteachers to understand that some of their teenagers had been there that night. The incredible importance of Manchester and Liverpool in my region of the north-west is part of our culture, and what happens in Manchester and in Merseyside is felt in Lancashire. That is why we are determined to learn the lessons from Lord Kerslake's report, and I am always happy to meet the hon. Lady and her colleagues from Manchester if any more help is required.

**James Brokenshire** (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Lord Kerslake's report makes several compelling and important recommendations after this appalling atrocity. My right hon. Friend will be aware of the joint emergency services interoperability programme, which is designed to bring together the work of our emergency services to deal with precisely these sorts of incidents. As part of his ongoing work, will he look at what lessons can be

applied here and at how the JESIP principles can be extended, so that we can ensure that our blue-light emergency services are best able to work together and respond in a positive and effective way when dealing with such appalling events?

**Mr Wallace:** I pay respect to my right hon. Friend, a former Security Minister, who knows too well what goes on and the complexities for which we plan. One of the failings identified in the Kerslake report is that the national inter-agency liaison officer in this event was too much involved in command and control of the fire service, rather than providing advice to the fire service. When I look back over many other incidents, that officer has been there as an adviser, not a gold or silver commander at the time, and that is one of the lessons to be learned. It is important that we in the Home Office and those in fire authorities around the country consider how we are deploying that key individual to ensure that they are doing what they are supposed to, rather having lots of other responsibilities lumped on to them, meaning that we do not necessarily get the best results when they are tested in such environments.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) for requesting this urgent question and that it was granted. It was sobering for us all to read the names of the victims at the start of the Kerslake report. Today, we think of them and of all those affected by the terrible attack in Manchester on 22 May 2017.

The review makes it clear that there is a lot to be proud of in the responses of the city region of Greater Manchester and of its emergency services. At the same time, however, it is entirely right that we learn lessons for the future. I agree with the Mayor of Greater Manchester, who said clearly that bereaved families must be at the heart of the process. Does the Minister agree that communication and procedures are central to those lessons? There was no shared communication across the agencies of the declaration of Operation Plato, and Greater Manchester fire and rescue service was left, in the words of the review, "outside the loop" and could not play a meaningful role in the response for nearly two hours. The first meeting of the strategic co-ordinating group could, the review said, have been held "earlier than 04:15 hrs". The set-up of the casualty bureau was severely hampered by what is described as a "the complete failure of the National Mutual Aid Telephony system provided by Vodafone."

Vodafone has a national contract with the Home Office, so will the Minister examine that contract and the guarantees that can be secured from Vodafone to ensure that such a situation does not happen again—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman has exceeded his time, so I think he is finished.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** I have one question.

**Mr Speaker:** One more question, the hon. Gentleman means.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** Just one more question.

**Mr Speaker:** Blurt it out, man.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds:** Finally, will the Minister be reviewing the joint operating principles for responding to a terror attack in the light of the matters I mentioned?

**Mr Wallace:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. As for this last point, we always review such things. We have a new Contest process, which involves examining where we can learn lessons all the way through, and there are many lessons to be learned from all the tragic attacks we had last year. He is absolutely right about Vodafone, and I am determined to ensure that we find out what went wrong. On the plus side, it has not happened before or after, but that is not an excuse and we must ensure that we receive guarantees, and exercising can help with that.

I want to highlight one important point. I have read some of the media over the past few days, and one would not be blamed for thinking that no one was there on the scene, but that was not the case. Within one minute of the explosion, which was targeted at women and children, British Transport police, police community support officers and paramedics were there. Within 12 minutes, ambulances were on the scene. It is regretful that the fire service was not there, but that was not key to whether people were getting treatment. The other blue-light emergency services did a fantastic job. They set up a casualty station, and they improvised. I know that the Labour party fully understands that and supports that view, and it is something that we should reflect on when the media picks on the worst, not the best, of the event.

We will continue to keep things under review, and I have always said to the shadow Minister that if he would like to visit some of the response units to see how things are being worked through, I would be delighted to host him—or any other Member—to ensure that the complexity of the situation is understood.

The biggest point in relation to the report and all terrorist actions is that we often start by not knowing what the situation is. All Members will remember the day of the Westminster Bridge attack: we were locked in our offices and shut off from one another because we did not know whether it involved firearms or a bomb or whether another person was in the House or not. That is the biggest challenge that our blue-light services face—“Is it a single explosion?” If lots of protocols had been broken in Manchester and there had been a second device—there are lots of examples of where second devices or attacks have been employed—I would hate to have been standing here for another reason, saying that we exposed our emergency services to too much danger because we rushed in or did not do something. It is a difficult balance to make, but I think the right calls were made on the night. Yes, there were some failures, but my constituents and those of the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) can be confident that help was there and that the blue-light emergency services did a fantastic and brave job.

**Mr Marcus Jones** (Nuneaton) (Con): This was a barbaric act of terrorism, and I welcome my right hon. Friend’s measured tone in response to the report. In an ideal world, we would always work to prevent such incidents from happening in the first place, so what more are the Government willing to do to put additional resources into counter-terrorism to ensure that we do not see these awful events on our streets?

**Mr Wallace:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. We are always open to more requests, and the Home Office will take the case to the Chancellor. After last year’s attacks, the police and the security services requested more funding, so we went to the Treasury and got £71 million more than was marked to be spent, including £51 million of new money, and we will continue to invest.

In Manchester, we have met nearly all requests for funds, but there are some still to work through. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has asked my Department to speak to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy about business rate relief for the businesses that may face bills, but not the council, which will not receive so much in business rates. There is always more to do, but we are in listening mode, and we do our best to get the money to help.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on securing this urgent question and commend the Minister for his full responses so far. As others have said, the attack was a terrible atrocity, and our thoughts today must be with the dead, their families, the injured and all those who have suffered terribly. The authors of the report should be commended on a full report and a prompt response.

As has been said by others, the revelations about press intrusion into the grieving families of the dead are utterly shocking. Does the Minister agree that those findings underline that the attitude of some in the press that everyone should be investigated, held to account and regulated apart from them needs to be challenged? Does he agree that regulation of the press needs to be considered again and that Leveson 2 should be reopened, as was promised?

**Mr Wallace:** I am grateful to the hon. and learned Lady. I am not going to go down the path of Leveson 2, but I totally agree that no one is above the law. Whether a journalist, a police officer or an ordinary member of the public, no one is above the law. That means that journalists should follow the correct procedures and the rules about respecting victims, and the media should, as they are sometimes requested to by the police and hospital staff, hold back. The need for sensationalism does not trump the rights of victims. The media should behave sensibly.

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) for her urgent question, and I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for his statement. What are the Government doing through the Prevent strategy in schools and colleges? Obviously, Prevent is the thing that stops the conveyor belt to extremism.

**Mr Wallace:** My right hon. Friend makes an important point. If we are really to reduce the risk to our people, we need to invest in prevention. Although some people have issues with the Prevent scheme, we published the first lot of figures last week showing yet again that more than 200 people have been diverted away from following a path of violent extremism, and schools play one part of that role.<sup>1</sup>

1. [Official Report, 19 April 2018, Vol. 639, c. 3MC.]

[Mr Wallace]

This is about safeguarding, and it is key that people remember young people are being preyed upon right now—I am afraid that I see it in ongoing operations—by people who choose to groom them. Whether young people are being groomed sexually, being groomed for violent extremism or being groomed by the extreme right wing, the methods are exactly the same. We have to invest in Prevent, and we hope to see more investment in Prevent with the Contest review. If we do not deal with it effectively upstream, we will still be here having this debate in many years' time.

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I support the urgent question and powerful words of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), and I welcome both Front-Bench responses. I join the report in paying tribute to the hundreds, if not thousands, of acts of individual bravery and selflessness and to the work of the emergency services and their support for the victims.

Does the Minister agree that the seriousness of the failure of the Vodafone contract is compounded by the fact that the contract is drawn on only in such extreme circumstances? Also, in his reflections on the importance of such a report, will he look further at commissioning an independent report on the Parsons Green attack and on the implementation of the Prevent programme in that case, so that lessons can also be learned from that attack?

**Mr Wallace:** The right hon. Lady will know there is still some way to run in the coroner's inquest and other inquiries, certainly on Manchester, when it comes to attribution and the avoidability of death, etc. We should not forget that a live police investigation of the event in Manchester is still ongoing, with an extradition request outstanding that we are working to help the Libyans to fulfil so we can see justice be done—that is another plank in this process.

On Prevent and the case of the Parsons Green bomber, there has been an internal review by the police with the local Prevent organisation. I am happy to brief the right hon. Lady on some of that on Privy Council terms, if she would like to come. There are definitely issues there that need to be sorted, but Prevent, as a policy, is not guaranteed. We have to try, as a society, to deradicalise and divert people. There are people who are determined to commit acts of murder and brutality, but we would be totally wrong if we did not try to deradicalise them because we cannot give a 100% guarantee. We will continue to try to make sure we are safe.

**Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): As my right hon. Friend the Minister has already mentioned, this tragedy went beyond Manchester and into Lancashire. Indeed, the first two victims to be named—indeed, the youngest victim—were from the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) who, as a mum of two young children, asked me to mention it today. Georgina Callander and Saffie Rose Roussos were two young people whose lives were tragically taken. As has been touched on, it is important that the review also looks at the counselling services that are available in schools and that are available to younger people not

just in Manchester but beyond, because young people's lives were touched in a way that should never have happened at such a young age.

**Mr Wallace:** My daughter was at the arena not that night but a few weeks before. The arena is a hub for many teenagers in that part of the world. Being a north-west MP, I attended the first Cobra meeting in the morning not down in the Cabinet Office but from Manchester. The point my hon. Friend makes is the very point I made, which is that these teenagers will go back to their schools and their communities, which are not necessarily in the city centre or near the seat of the explosion. Have we put in place the messaging to our education authorities and so on to pick up on that? I was assured that the answer is yes. I asked them to go back and redouble the messaging, and we hope that was done. If it was not, I would be happy to hear from colleagues on both sides of the House to ensure that we follow up on those assurances. One lesson to remember is that people come to big cities from all over the country, and they will disperse back and take their injuries, whether mental or physical, with them.

**Graham Stringer** (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): In extreme adversity, this may well have been Manchester's finest hour. Andy Burnham, Richard Leese and Eddy Newman were a model of civic leadership during that period. The people of Manchester behaved heroically, as did the first responders to this terrible event. The force duty officer, in ignoring protocol and using his judgment, gave support and possibly saved lives in the immediate aftermath of the bomb.

Having paid those tributes, I would like to ask the Minister whether, if such a tragic event happens again in Manchester or anywhere else in the country—we all hope it does not—the Vodafone system, as of today, is up and working. We cannot afford another catastrophic failure of the communications system.

**Mr Wallace:** The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. Not only have I sought and been given assurances about the Vodafone system, I have also asked that we explore a back-up system or contingency plan if something like this does not work in future. There is always the potential for something to go wrong with technology, which is why we need to exercise it, but we also need to consider alternatives should the technology fail on the night.

The one thing on which I can give the hon. Gentleman some assurance is that, before and after, the technology worked successfully at, for example, London Bridge and Westminster and elsewhere, but it is not good enough that the technology did not work on the night when it was needed in Manchester.

**Sir Oliver Heald** (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I was in Manchester that day and the following morning. Although there are lessons to be learned, and the Kerslake review highlights those lessons, the strength of the Manchester people was striking—resilient, implacable and determined to continue their lives. We should pay tribute to them for their incredibly British response and to Ariana Grande and the other artists who took part in the later musical event, which I thought was just tremendous.

**Mr Wallace:** My right hon. and learned Friend makes an important point. I might say it was a northern response, but it was a solid British response. I have to pay tribute to the Members of Parliament for Greater Manchester. The hon. Member for Manchester Central has been constantly supportive of the city and of the Mayor in getting these things done, and I pay tribute to all those who have made sure that we are learning the lessons and that we have not forgotten. In this day and age, things move so quickly that the media sometimes have the memory of a goldfish and move on to the next story very quickly. Thanks to the likes of the hon. Lady, we have not forgotten.

**Jim McMahon** (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to Lisa Lees and Alison Howe, two Royton mums who went to collect their 15-year-old daughters who went to the Manchester arena but did not return home. The response from the community and from our emergency services was inspiring. Although faults have been found with the fire service, I place on record that the fire service is not outside our community; the fire service is our community. How we learn from this, and how we build and go forward from it, will be the test.

Although some of the national media were very intrusive, there was also some outstanding journalism, particularly by the *Manchester Evening News*, which was compassionate, told the human story and brought the community together at a very difficult time.

**Mr Wallace:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. People should understand that the response by the emergency services was not just about the city of Manchester. One of the proudest things for me is that, when I walked into Manchester police headquarters at about 8.30 am, the counter-terrorism commander on duty came from the Lancashire force. It was a collective effort, whether from the local fire service or ambulances sent from all over the north-west to help. It shows the strength of the Contest strategy that the response is about pulling together.

Only last week, I went to visit the Salisbury investigation, where I found officers from the midlands and the north of England responding in both the chemical and decontamination space and in the investigation. The fire service is absolutely important; I understand the frustration of many of those brave men and women who feel that they did not have access to helping people, although I want the public to understand that it was not that people were therefore left alone. We will work together to put this right, so that it does not happen in the future, but I must say that the judgments that were made were as much about the safety of officers and crew as they were about the victims.

**Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to highlight the Kerslake report that this urgent question has given. In talking about the emergency services, will the Minister join me in ensuring that the high esteem in which our firefighters are held is not in any way tarnished by this report and in acknowledging the brave service they give, day in, day out, putting their lives on the line to protect ours?

**Mr Wallace:** My hon. Friend makes a good point. Nothing in this report is about a failure of the services that were deployed that night. There were failures relating to some individual decisions, including on interpretations.

There was a failure of technology in respect of the Vodafone response. To some extent, as we have discussed earlier, there was a failure of interpretation—whether or not it was too rigid—but this was not about the failure of the fire service and the police to do their job, about their ability to do their job or about the people who make up both services.

**Mr Ivan Lewis** (Bury South) (Ind): May I echo the congratulations given to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on ensuring that we can have this discussion? As the Minister is aware, we remain immensely proud of the response of the people of Manchester, the political leadership of Greater Manchester and frontline emergency service workers, the vast majority of whom did an excellent job. We are also proud of the fact that we came together as a community and said that there would be zero tolerance of Islamophobia in the aftermath of this incident. Will he agree to meet the people leading the review on radicalisation policy in Greater Manchester, the leaders of Oldham Council and of Bury Council, to learn lessons about whether the Prevent programme is in fact working? There are massive differences of opinion on that. Will the Government agree to learn from the review that Greater Manchester is undertaking on radicalisation policy?

**Mr Wallace:** I am very happy to meet the people undertaking that review, but I must point out that the figures published yesterday and those published earlier in the month show that Prevent is working in many areas.<sup>1</sup> Prevent is not perfect. I listened carefully to the discussion on the BBC's "Question Time" not long after the event, when Andy Burnham and the representative from the Crown Prosecution Service in the north-west gave their views on Prevent at the time. Prevent could be better applied sometimes; but ultimately, if we are saying that it is about safeguarding and delivering a space so that people are not radicalised, the people who are against Prevent have to come up with an alternative. Every alternative I have heard articulated is Prevent with a different name. I do not think that when dealing with really important issues about young people being groomed and exploited we should be too hung up on the semantics of the name—we should be looking at the results and the processes. Again, I say to Members that I am happy to take them to meet Prevent providers, to understand communities. I met a family whose children were diverted from going off to fight in Syria, and if we were to look that lady in the eye and say, "Sorry, Prevent is not working," she will give us a rather robust answer about whether it is or not.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): The whole country was shocked by the severity of this atrocity, particularly as it was aimed at young people who were going out for a night of fun with their friends. All our thoughts must be with the victims and their families, and our thanks must go to the emergency services. As we are learning the lessons from this terrible atrocity, will the Minister update the House on how many attacks have been disrupted in this country since this terrible atrocity and which groups are responsible for trying to perpetrate such attacks?

**Mr Wallace:** The best and latest figures I can give my hon. Friend are that since the first attack last year at Westminster Bridge 10 plots were disrupted and there

1. [Official Report, 19 April 2018, Vol. 639, c. 4MC.]

[Mr Wallace]

were four extreme right-wing plots. The plots we face are broad, coming from people ranging from neo-Nazis—that is why we proscribed National Action earlier in the year—to followers of Daesh, followers of al-Qaeda and other extremists who do not follow anything other than seeking to cause harm and to murder on our streets. No one has a copyright on terrorism in this country; a number of groups of people are trying to prosecute it. Again, that is why Prevent is important. Prevent is not just about Islamist terrorism; it is also about extreme right-wing terrorism, and in some parts of the country referrals to Prevent are greater in the extreme right-wing space than they are in the Islamist space.

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Thank you again, Mr Speaker, for your solidarity with the people of Manchester in the aftermath of the attack. We owe a debt of gratitude to Lord Kerslake and Andy Burnham for an excellent piece of work; this is a very good report. Although it is right that we learn lessons, we should take pride in the actions of the first responders and the people of Manchester. I am also proud of the way our local paper, the *Manchester Evening News*, reported the incident and the aftermath, but sadly the same cannot be said of a lot of the media. What steps can the Government take to help the Independent Press Standards Organisation develop a new code of conduct to cover incidents such as the one at Manchester Arena, given that victims spoke of the “intrusive and overbearing” treatment from some of the media?

**Mr Wallace:** Both local papers, the *Lancashire Evening Post* and the *Manchester Evening News*, did the right thing: they got behind the community and understood what had happened in the middle of them. I go back to a point I made earlier: sometimes it is important that the media understand that sensationalism is not the trump card that means they can ignore all the other rules of accuracy and of being sensitive to people’s issues. The media have a strong role to play in communicating the facts in the immediate aftermath of events such as this, because when we do not have facts people get scared. This is why I have tried to work on this, as we all have. The reason people sometimes get frustrated with the police and the intelligence services not being as quick as they could to inform them of things is that if we get the facts wrong, people get scared. We have to make sure that the terrorists do not win by scaring us. We win by showing that we are controlled and by responding. The media have a really important and responsible role to play in that.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): Building on the previous question and the Minister’s answer, does he agree that the real-time reporting of incidents and of their aftermath needs to be more carefully thought about by some elements of the media? Would he welcome a constructive industry-led approach to looking at that?

**Mr Wallace:** I would welcome any initiative that does that. This is a real challenge in the 21st century: in real time, people are eyewitnesses and people tweet, having immediately got on their phone. That is not going to go away. What is important is that the producers, the people churning out the programmes and the editors

are employed, partly, to be able to sift gossip from reality, and sensationalism from impacting stories. The message is that there is a strong role for the editors and producers in this day and age of live reporting. They must be able to say, “It might be sensational, but we are not going to report it because it is not true or factual, and I would not be responsible if I did.”

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I join colleagues in once again sending condolences to all the victims of this terrible attack in our city and in paying tribute to all in our emergency services and in the wider community who served to support and care for them. In the immediate aftermath of the attack, many people and faith groups right across the faith spectrum rushed to offer help and hospitality to those who were frightened and alone that night. Shamefully, in the aftermath of the attacks attempts were also made by the far right to drive a wedge between different faith communities. Will the Minister join me in utterly condemning such shameful conduct? Will he confirm the Government’s intent always to crack down on the promotion of division and hatred?

**Mr Wallace:** The hon. Lady makes a powerful and important point. Like her, I represent Muslim communities, doing so in Preston. Let me say in response to an earlier point that there is Islamophobia and we have to deal with that. We have to stand up to Islamophobia as strongly as we stand up to anti-Semitism and all the other issues that are about dividing our communities. The terrorists, be they neo-Nazis or from Daesh, want to divide our communities; they want us to hate each other and to weaken the society we belong to. I am absolutely determined, as I know all of us in this House are, to stand up against that and to give those people no quarter. We should double our efforts, both through other programmes such as Prevent and in our counter-extremism work on getting children, certainly in school, to understand what this is about. We must also be strong enough to have a debate about extremism without shutting down freedom of speech.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome the report’s findings and congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on bringing this issue to the House. Notwithstanding the fact that the Minister has already said he does not want to go down the Leveson route, in his comments and his replies to several Members, most notably the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), he expressed exactly the concerns that those of us who believe that Leveson 2 must go ahead feel very strongly. Will he please take those comments to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and point out to him the failure of a system that did not protect the innocent victims of that explosion from press intrusion?

**Mr Wallace:** I understand the point, which was strongly made by the hon. Lady, and will of course reflect that to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. There is a real challenge and it is easier said than done. I remember the cack-handed banning of the voice of Sinn Féin all those years ago and how badly that went down. No one is suggesting that that is how far people go, but we have to be careful in how we restrict the media in a space that is about freedom of speech, getting across messages and so on.

I will absolutely work to make sure that the media are more responsible and face the consequences of bad or untrue reporting, but I must also recognise and uphold the principle of freedom of speech.

**Jonathan Reynolds** (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): It is difficult to read parts of the report, because it requires us to relive that evening and the days after it, but there is much to be proud of in terms of the response and the incredible sense of solidarity across Greater Manchester and throughout the whole country in the days afterwards. A report such as this should never be about scapegoating—it is about learning lessons—but I have been asked by constituents of mine who are firefighters to place on record their sense of frustration at not being able to help sooner. Having acknowledged that, let us learn the lesson from it. Let us all, from all parts of the House, reiterate our tremendous admiration for and pride in all our emergency services.

**Mr Wallace:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The reliving of that horrendous night is done by our police officers and ambulance crews every day of their lives. One of the most disturbing parts of my job was to see a lot of the footage that was captured before, during and after the attack. That will stay with me for the rest of my life, and I was not even on the scene. Our emergency services will relive it. I passionately feel the frustration of those firefighters who wanted to help on that day. They do not deserve to have to deal with that, which is why we have to put some of those things right through the recommendations in Lord Kerslake's report. I will make sure that we do that, and the only thing I would say is, "Rest assured, others were there to treat the victims and help the bereaved."

**Angus Brendan MacNeil** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): A school friend of mine, Roddy MacLeod, and his wife Marion lost their daughter Eilidh in the attack at the Ariana Grande concert in Manchester. Also from the Isle of Barra was 15-year-old Laura MacIntyre, who, incidentally, was a good friend of my middle daughter. She was terribly injured but is making a good recovery. She is walking and back at school, and she is as witty as ever. Roddy and Marion welcome the recommendations in the report and wholeheartedly agree on the individual acts of heroism on that night that were praised in the report. They have said quite heroically themselves that they hope that such reports will help to inform individuals and heads of service for the future.

I echo the points that have been made about the printed newspapers in particular. I was personally asked by a relative to rush to the house of a distraught grandmother, who felt further panicked by a journalist at the doorstep. Fortunately, the journalist had gone, and was probably only doing the bidding of the editor quite reluctantly. On the whole, the media were good that week—we have to acknowledge that—but can we please encourage the ending of the practice of doorstepping, particularly of the terribly bereaved? It is not pleasant and it is very distressing.

**Mr Speaker:** It is a very important question and I think a single-sentence reply will suffice.

**Mr Wallace:** All I can do is entirely support the hon. Gentleman's observation. The death knock, as I think some journalists often call it, is not something that should carry on. It is awful and just unacceptable.

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The Fire Brigades Union has commented that Greater Manchester fire and rescue services is

"the only emergency service in Manchester without its own dedicated service control room."

In the light of the communication problems identified in the report, will the Minister review this situation?

**Mr Wallace:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady, but think I need to check her assertion. I have been to the Merseyside joint control room, where they do incredible amounts of good work. The north-west fire control is a regional control room. The report does not point to that as the failure; the point was the failure in the inter-agency liaison officer not being able necessarily to take the right decisions, and their being involved in almost too many of the decisions; it was not about the location or organisation of the control room. Before we suddenly seek to change that in the north-west, we should look at the report's findings, which were very much about the roles of a few individuals and the decisions that they took on the night.

**Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab): May I put on record the fact that after the attack, many people volunteered their services, whether they were cab drivers, or restaurant owners who opened their restaurants to the victims and everyone around?

My constituent Rebecca Ridgeway is a disabled person who uses a wheelchair. When she went into the arena, she had to be taken out of her wheelchair and placed on a seat. When the incident occurred, there was nobody there to look after her. In fact, somebody came in, put her in her wheelchair and she was taken out—not by the arena staff or the security staff, but by a member of the public. As a result of the incident, she has not been able to leave her house, so I visited her in her home. She told me that there has been no counselling, psychiatric services or psychologists available in sufficient numbers to deal with her and many other people who suffered trauma from the incident. Will the Minister provide proper funding for that?

**Mr Wallace:** I am sorry to hear about the hon. Lady's constituent's experience. First, I am absolutely happy to take the detail of that case to event organisers throughout the country, whom I meet regularly, to make sure that they think about disability. Secondly, with regard to her particular constituent, I have met the victims liaison team and many of the health trusts in the region, and they are delivering services, so if she is not getting that, will the hon. Lady please tell me the details? I will take that, either with her or on my own, to the relevant health trust to make sure that her constituent is given counselling and support. Many others are getting it and it is wrong that she is not.

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The Minister has comported himself really well at the Dispatch Box today, and I think the House agrees on that.

May I follow on from the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) and praise you, Mr Speaker? You stood shoulder to shoulder with us on 23 May last year, when the Bishop of Manchester led us in prayers. We will never forget Tony Walsh doing the poem "This is the

[Mike Kane]

place”. In respect of what the right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) and my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) said about civic leadership, we put on record our thanks to the Bishop of Manchester and all the faith leaders who have shown such solidarity together. We have had no subsequent trouble in our city because of that strong leadership.

**Mr Wallace:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We should put it on record that the civic leadership of Manchester—including Andy Burnham, the chief executive of the council and the leader of the council—has been exemplary. Because of that, the terrorists have not been successful in dividing our communities, and nor will they be. Manchester is a perfect example, and I used it recently when talking to Salisbury’s local civic leadership. I said, “If you want an example of how to do it, albeit on a different scale—making sure that your communities return to normal and being prepared to ask central Government for funding—look at the way they did it in Manchester.” We should all be proud of it.

**Mr Speaker:** I thank the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) for highlighting this extremely important matter, and I thank all colleagues for taking part and for taking part in the way in which they did in the exchanges that followed.

## Worboys Case and the Parole Board

1.39 pm

**The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke):** With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the High Court judgment handed down this morning in the case relating to the Parole Board’s decision to release John Radford, formerly known as John Worboys.

This is an important and unprecedented case. The President of the Queen’s Bench Division, Sir Brian Leveson, the most senior judge who heard this case, said that it is wholly exceptional. It is the first time that a Parole Board decision to release a prisoner has been challenged, and the first time that the rules on the non-disclosure of Parole Board decisions have been called into question.

The judgment quashes the Parole Board’s decision to release Worboys and finds that rule 25 of the Parole Board rules is unlawful. This means that Worboys’ case will now be resubmitted to the Parole Board. A new panel will be constituted, and updated evidence on his risk from prison and probation professionals will be provided. The panel will then assess anew whether Worboys is suitable for release.

Those victims covered by the victim contact scheme will be fully informed and involved in this process. My Department also has to reformulate the Parole Board’s rules to allow more transparency around decision making and reasoning.

It is clear that there was widespread concern about the decision by the Parole Board to release Worboys. As I have previously told the House, I share those concerns and, consequently, I welcome this judgment. I congratulate the victims who brought the judicial review and reiterate my heartfelt sympathy for all victims who have suffered as a result of Worboys’ hideous crimes.

I want to set out, in greater detail than I have previously been able to set out, the reasons why I did not bring a judicial review. As I told the House on 19 January, I looked carefully at whether I could challenge the decision. It would have been unprecedented for the Secretary of State to bring a judicial review against the Parole Board—a body which is independent but for which my Department is responsible. I took expert legal advice from the leading counsel on whether I should bring a challenge. The bar for judicial review is set high. I considered whether the decision was legally irrational—in other words, a decision that no reasonable Parole Board could have made. The advice that I received was that such an argument was highly unlikely to succeed, and, indeed, that argument did not succeed. However, the victims succeeded in a different argument. They challenged that, while Ministry of Justice officials opposed release, they should have done more to put forward all the relevant material on other offending. They also highlighted very significant failures on the part of the Parole Board to make all the necessary inquiries and so fully take into account wider evidence about Worboys’ offending.

I also received advice on the failure of process argument and was advised that this was not one that I, as Secretary of State, would have been able successfully to advance. The victims were better placed to make that argument, and that was the argument on which they won their case. It is right that the actions of Ministry officials, as well as the Parole Board, in this important and unusual

case have been laid open to judicial scrutiny. I have always said that I fully support the right of victims to bring this action. I have been very concerned at every point not to do anything to hinder the victims' right to challenge and to bring their arguments and their personal evidence before the court. Indeed, the judgment suggests that, had I brought a case, the standing of the victims may have been compromised.

The court's findings on how the decision was reached give rise to serious concerns. The court has found that "the credibility and reliability" of Worboys' account in relation to his previous offending behaviour

"was not probed to any extent, if at all"

by the Parole Board, and that although the Parole Board was entitled to make inquiries of the police in relation to his offending, it did not do so. Those are serious failings and they need serious action to address them. Given the circumstances, I have accepted Professor Nick Hardwick's resignation as chair of the organisation.

I am also taking the following actions: instructing my officials to issue new guidance that all relevant evidence of past offending should be included in the dossiers submitted to the Parole Board, including possibly police evidence, so that it can be robustly tested in each Parole Board hearing; putting in place robust procedures to check that every dossier sent by Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service to the Parole Board contains every necessary piece of evidence, including sentencing remarks or other relevant material from previous trials or other civil legal action; boosting the role of the Secretary of State's representative at Parole Board hearings, with a greater presumption that they should be present for those more complex cases where HM Prison and Probation Service is arguing strongly against release, as was the case in this instance; working with the Parole Board to review the composition of panels so that the Parole Board includes greater judicial expertise for complex high-profile cases, particularly where multiple victims are involved or where there is a significant dispute between expert witnesses as to the suitability for release; and developing more specialist training for Parole Board panel members.

The judgment also found that the blanket ban on the transparency of Parole Board proceedings is unlawful. I accept the finding of the court and will not be challenging this. It was my view from the beginning that very good reasons would be needed to persuade me that we should continue with a law that does not allow any transparency. I am now considering how the rule should be reformulated.

When I addressed the House on this matter in January, I said that I had commissioned a review into how victims were involved in Parole Board decisions, into the transparency of the Parole Board, and on whether there should be a way of challenging Parole Board decisions. That work has been continuing for these past two and a half months. Given the very serious issues identified in this case, I can announce today that I intend to conduct further work to examine the Parole Board rules in their entirety. As a result of the work that has been completed to date, I have already decided to abolish rule 25 in its current form and will do so as soon as possible after the Easter recess. This will enable us to provide for the Parole Board to make available to victims summaries of the decisions it makes.

In addition, I will bring forward proposals for Parole Board decisions to be challenged through an internal review mechanism where a separate judge-led panel will look again at cases that meet a designated criterion. I intend to consult on the detail of these proposals by the end of April, alongside other proposals to improve the way that victims are kept informed about the parole process. I am grateful to Baroness Newlove for her help with this part of the review and to Dame Glenys Stacey for her helpful suggestions and review of the way that victim liaison operated in this case. I will come back to the House with further proposals as they are developed.

In conclusion, let no one doubt the seriousness with which I take the issues raised by this morning's judgment or the bravery of the victims who brought this case to court. I commend this statement to the House.

1.46 pm

**Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement on today's High Court decision.

Today's unprecedented ruling, made possible by the Human Rights Act, clearly highlights the deep flaws in the initial Parole Board decision. That initial decision clearly caused anguish for the victims—those whose cases have been dealt with—and also for those who have not yet had justice. In addition, there has been deep concern among women and the public more widely. The head of the Parole Board has decided to stand down, but what is needed is real change in the way that the Parole Board functions.

The current legal restrictions on the Parole Board mean that we do not know why the initial decision was taken. That led to a rumour about where Worboys would be released, and even a rumour about his being released without a tag. That is not good for victims, and it is not good for public confidence. It cannot be right that women victims had to go to judicial review before the reasons for the release of John Worboys became available. We also remember the Government making the victims go to the Supreme Court to secure compensation following police failings.

Judges in the judicial review said that too much secrecy about Parole Board decisions under rule 25 of Parole Board proceedings prevents any reasons from being given for decisions made by the board. Therefore, as has been mentioned, the Worboys' case underlines once and for all that there is a need for the Government to take urgent action and urgent measures to guarantee greater transparency in Parole Board decisions. Given that the public are entitled to be informed about court judgments, they must also be entitled to be informed about the clear reasons behind Parole Board decisions.

Of course, this is not about undermining the independence of the Parole Board, and we on the Labour Benches will defend the independence of our judiciary. It is right that action is being taken to improve transparency. Is the Secretary of State's review also looking at guaranteeing not only that the public are informed about the reasons behind decisions, but that they are clear about the mechanism to challenge those decisions? Will the Secretary of State commit today to concluding his review of the Parole Board by the summer? We have seen other reviews by the Secretary of State's Department—on the victims' law and other issues—slip after initial announcements. Will he reassure the House that that will certainly not happen in this case?

[Richard Burgon]

A lawyer for the victims of John Worboys has said that the Ministry of Justice was responsible for preparing the dossier of evidence on which the Parole Board made its decision to release. Will the Secretary of State explain to the House why information about the so-called rape kit used by John Worboys and the sentencing remarks of the judge in the criminal trial of John Worboys were not included in this dossier? Why did the dossier contain nothing about the new information that came to light during the proceedings brought by victims against the Metropolitan police?

The failures in the Worboys case go much wider than the rules governing the Parole Board. It is clear from today's ruling that judicial review is a key tool enabling every citizen to challenge unjust or unlawful decisions by the state or other public bodies, and we have to be clear about the importance of the role of the Human Rights Act. Deep cuts to legal aid have undermined the ability of many to pursue judicial review. Personally, I do not think that it is right that victims of people such as John Worboys have to crowdfund to pursue justice. Justice cannot depend on the depths of people's pockets. Will the Government today commit to using their review of legal aid to look again at how it can support judicial reviews?

Will the Secretary of State give us more information about why he chose not to proceed with his own judicial review? To be blunt, does he regret his decision to pursue a cheap headline and brief the weekend newspapers in advance before properly checking whether he should pursue the judicial review? It is not just me asking this question; it has been reported that the Secretary of State's Conservative colleagues are asking it too, to the extent that the Prime Minister has been moved today to confirm that she still has full confidence in him. The Secretary of State has tried to defend his decision not to pursue a judicial review, although he has not yet made the case properly. Given that, will he accept responsibility for the failings in the dossier presented by the Ministry of Justice?

There have been widespread failings in this case from the very outset. In 2009, John Worboys was convicted of 19 offences against 12 women, but the police have also linked him to about 100 other cases. Many of the victims have raised concerns—and my office has been contacted by other victims—about police failings in the handling of the case. Others have raised concerns about the decision of the Crown Prosecution Service not to prosecute. Of course, we have also seen many complaints about the Parole Board and about the failures of the victim contact scheme properly to notify victims of the parole hearing.

It is clear that we need a thorough examination of the handling of this case, from the very first attack reported to the police by a victim right through to the Parole Board hearings. Given that this is the third occasion that I ask, will the Secretary of State agree to an end-to-end review into this matter—from start to finish? The victims and the public deserve no less.

**Mr Gauke:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman regarding transparency. I am pleased that there is cross-party consensus on the need for increased transparency of Parole Board decisions. That should not undermine Parole Board independence, which is important. I hope

to move swiftly to change systems in order to ensure that the reasons that the Parole Board has reached a decision become available to the victims. I hope that that will be in place shortly.

The hon. Gentleman touched on the licence conditions. In a way, this is not necessarily as much of an issue as it was. It had been determined that Worboys would be electronically tagged and excluded from London. That may or may not be an issue in the future, depending on future Parole Board decisions.

On the dossier that was provided by the National Probation Service—and, therefore, my Department—for the hearing that occurred on 8 November last year, it is the case that there may well have been information that should have been included in the dossier and that was not provided, but it is worth pointing out that it is the responsibility of the Parole Board to satisfy itself that an offender is no longer a risk to the public. The judgment of Sir Brian Leveson was that the Parole Board failed to probe that evidence sufficiently, as it should have done. I reiterate that the National Probation Service opposed the release of John Worboys.

I made no secret of the fact that I was considering whether to take a judicial review, and I set out in my earlier remarks the reasons why I did not bring that forward. The reality was that the victims were in a better position than me to bring a successful case. It is important that we ensure that when the Parole Board reaches a conclusion that meets certain criteria, there is an ability for it to look again and examine whether the relevant panel has performed its duties as it should have done. Sadly, that is not what happened in this particular case, and that is the issue that we need to fix for the future.

**Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con):** I welcome Sir Brian Leveson's judgment. The victims have obviously got the justice that they were seeking. Does my right hon. Friend accept that it would have been absolutely scandalous if he, as Justice Secretary, had ignored the legal advice that he got, which sounds to have been perfectly sensible on the basis of facts available to him? It would be a very bad day if Ministers started intervening in criminal sentencing cases in response to campaigning, and did not judge them objectively according to the rule of law and the public interest.

While implementing these extremely welcome proposals, which are obviously needed in the light of all this, would my right hon. Friend make sure that the Parole Board and its panels are not undermined when they carry out properly their extremely difficult task? The Parole Board is often asked almost impossible questions, and we cannot have people making any judgments except on the basis of the best judgment that they can make in the public interest. Criminal sentencing must never be simply a question of campaigning and responding to popular pressure.

**Mr Gauke:** I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend, who is also a distinguished predecessor in my post. He is absolutely right on both counts. In terms of whether I took action or not, I thought that it was very important to test the legal arguments. As I made clear on 19 January, I was not going to stand in the way of others and, indeed, others may have been better placed to bring that case. I looked carefully at the advice I had received and based my actions on that advice.

My right hon. and learned Friend's second point is also important. There were failures in what the Parole Board did, including not probing sufficiently and not being sufficiently inquisitive. We must, however, accept that the Parole Board makes thousands of decisions every year that often involve difficult judgments, and it is not always necessarily going to get it right, but it is not the role of politicians to interfere and second-guess those decisions. We do, though, have a role in ensuring that we have a system in place with clear guidance, clear training and the right people. We clearly need to do some work on that, and I have set out some proposals today.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his very full statement. I welcome this decision, both in respect of the remit back to the Parole Board and on the transparency of the reasons. It seems that there has been a shocking dereliction of duty on the part of the Parole Board. I welcome the actions that the Secretary of State is taking to tackle this. It is important that Professor Hardwick, who has resigned, is not made a scapegoat. I congratulate the Secretary of State on focusing on the rules and procedures, which need to be tightened up.

Something has gone very wrong in this case from the start. In order to get justice, the victims themselves have had to go to court to vindicate their rights—not once, but twice. First, they had to go to court in order to get a proper investigation by the police and a prosecution of the cases. Secondly, they had to protect themselves from the early release of their attacker.

As others have said, judicial review has proved to be a key tool in this respect. It is therefore very unfortunate that legal aid is no longer widely available in England and Wales for judicial review. I urge the Secretary of State to look at the independent review of legal aid in Scotland—I stress the words “independent review”—that was published earlier this month, because it showed that with less spend per capita than in England, legal aid has much wider eligibility and scope in Scotland. Seventy per cent. of Scots are eligible for legal aid. If that can be done on less money per capita in Scotland, then it can be done in England. Will he commit to an independent review of legal aid in England and Wales so that if victims in these cases have to use judicial review, they can have the wherewithal to do it regardless of their means?

**Mr Gauke:** On legal aid, the hon. and learned Lady will be aware that we are undertaking a post-implementation review of the changes to legal aid that were made earlier in this decade, and we will conclude that before the end of the year. Certainly, given what she has said, we would want to take into account the evidence in Scotland as part of that review.

As for failures within the Parole Board, I think, as I said, that it is right that Professor Nick Hardwick stand down as chair of the Parole Board. I acknowledge that he has been a dedicated public servant who has done a number of very good things at the Parole Board as well. However, I believe that there have been significant failures and that at this point new leadership is required within the Parole Board.

**Zac Goldsmith** (Richmond Park) (Con): I very much support the calls by the Opposition for a thorough, end-to-end review. The reality is that these victims have managed to blow open the system using, as we have heard, a very big, popular campaign. They have given us a rare glimpse into something that many people across this House would find utterly terrifying, given the profound errors that have been uncovered by Leveson in the inquiry that he has just concluded. Will the component of my right hon. Friend's review relating to transparency be completed in advance of the new Parole Board determining the second stage of the Worboys case?

**Mr Gauke:** First, let me put on record my tribute to my hon. Friend for his tireless work on this case, as he has been a very strong advocate for the victims. On transparency, as I said, I hope that we can make progress in the course of the next few weeks. It is not for me to determine when the Parole Board will next look at John Worboys' case, but I would be astonished if it were before we had new rules on transparency in place.

**David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): Let me place on record, if I may, that Nick Hardwick is a decent man whom I have known for a long time professionally and personally. He has taken his resignation seriously today. With regard to the Secretary of State's abolition of rule 25, he used the words “in its current form”. What areas of transparency does he expect still to be exempt?

**Mr Gauke:** The challenge in this—having seen in this case the decision notice by the Parole Board—is that there might be, for example, information provided by the prisoner to a psychologist, as part of the risk assessment, that is deeply personal. In order to have openness between, say, a prisoner and a psychologist, it must be possible for some of that information to remain confidential, so we cannot put everything out there. Indeed, there may be information relevant to victims that they would not want to be put into the public domain. As I say, a summary of the conclusions that the Parole Board has reached should be made available. The points made by Members on both sides of the House in saying that greater transparency is needed are absolutely right.

**Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his very detailed and considered response to what is itself a very detailed and considered judgment by the President of the Queen's Bench Division. It is perhaps worth observing that it is quite clear from paragraph 130 that the ground on which the Secretary of State was urged to enter the judicial review would not have succeeded.

The Justice Committee wrote to the Secretary of State yesterday raising some of the issues that he has now pre-emptively dealt with in his statement. As well as reform of rule 25 and a proper review or repeal process so that judicial review is no longer necessary in future, will he consider the observations given to us in evidence, and by the Court as well, about the importance of having forensically skilled legal representation for the Secretary of State at hearings in serious cases to test the evidence, and about the desirability of having a serving or retired judge to chair the panel in serious cases?

**Mr Gauke:** I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks. Where there is reconsideration, the second panel should be led by someone with legal, and indeed judicial, experience. One of the things that we are clearly going to have to look at is the degree to which proper legal experience is involved in this process. I agree that it is important that where the Secretary of State has a representative at one of these matters, they are well placed to make a strong case.

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I welcome the Court's decision. Many of us were shocked and appalled by the original Parole Board decision, given the number of vile sexual assaults and rapes in this case. The Secretary of State is right to put forward reforms and to say that there are serious questions for the Parole Board. I hope that he will make it clear that he recognises that there are also serious questions for the Ministry of Justice, which had to put forward the evidence in this case. It is not a good look simply to say that this is about the responsibility of the Parole Board, if we are to get to the reforms that we actually need. Does he recognise that one of the big failings in this case was about support for, and proper information for, victims throughout the process? Will he make that an urgent priority in the reforms that are put forward?

**Mr Gauke:** The point about victims is very important. The right hon. Lady will be aware that Dame Glenys Stacey undertook an immediate review of the facts in this case. There is clearly a lot to learn about how victims are treated. In this particular case, the fact that victims were receiving information from the media rather than being contacted directly is not something that we want to see repeated. She is absolutely right to raise that point.

On the MOJ's position, as I set out in my statement, there is much more that we can do to ensure that information on things like sentencing remarks should be provided as part of the dossier consistently and as a matter of course. Clearly, there were failures in this regard. That is partly why my position in bringing a judicial review was weaker than that of the victims, because they were able to make these arguments in a way that was not open to me. We need to find ways in which we can make improvements across the system. I stress that the national probation service was clear that it did not think that Worboys should be released.

**Mr Dominic Grieve** (Beaconsfield) (Con): First, may I say to my right hon. Friend that the criticisms of him for not bringing the judicial review are entirely misplaced? He was in no position to do it. Indeed, it is likely that had he chosen to do it, it would have failed, and having failed, it would have prevented anybody else, within the time limit, from going ahead and bringing such a judicial review.

On the wider issue, my right hon. Friend may agree that the problem we have—those of us who have attended meetings of the Parole Board as observers can see this—is that the workload has grown exponentially with the rise in indeterminate sentences. I really do wonder whether we now have a proper process in place for dealing with this kind of case where there is public concern as to when the moment of release is finally determined. May I urge him, in carrying out his review,

to consider that he may want to come back to Parliament to have this issue debated to determine what Parliament thinks should be the appropriate way of proceeding, because this is now a quasi-judicial process with immense consequences for victims, but also of course for those who are incarcerated and are seeking to be released?

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Can I just gently say, before the Secretary of State responds, that this is an extremely important matter about which we have just heard in the most learned terms from one of our most learned authorities? However, there are a further 16 hon. and right hon. Members seeking to catch the eye of the Chair. The Chair likes to accommodate interest. I gently point out that there is some danger of us reaching a position where everything will have been said but not yet by everybody.

**Mr Gauke:** Thank you for your guidance, Mr Speaker.

I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his remarks. He makes an important point: had I taken a judicial review, it may have brought into question the standing of the victims, as Sir Brian Leveson points out. In terms of the workload, to be fair, the Parole Board had been making progress with the backlog of imprisonment for public protection cases, but it remains significant—there are still something like 3,000 prisoners on an IPP sentence in prison, and they need to be properly assessed.

**Sir Edward Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): May I associate my party with the widespread welcome for the High Court decision and the congratulations to the two brave victims who brought this action? I also want to state for the record that I think the Secretary of State has acted properly throughout.

With respect to reform of the Parole Board, the Father of the House talked about the balance between accountability and independence. Because that is so tricky to get right, as we have seen, will the Secretary of State commit today to engage all parties in the House at an early stage, so that together we can strike an agreement on how to manage that balance?

**Mr Gauke:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks. His point is about accountability and independence. There is a challenge here. I want to make it clear that I do not believe it is the role of Ministers to intervene as a matter of course in individual cases because they do not particularly like the judgment. I have made no secret of the fact that I did not like the Worboys decision, but I made an assessment and sought advice as to whether there was a legal route for me to take action and concluded that there was not. I believe that the Parole Board has to be independent, and I wish to maintain that, but I also think that a balance has to be struck, as the right hon. Gentleman says, and some weaknesses have been revealed in the Parole Board that we need to address.

**Justine Greening** (Putney) (Con): Can the Secretary of State confirm that the judgment today can be appealed, potentially by Worboys? If so, how long will that process take, and does it have to happen before any new panel can be constituted? Finally, can he confirm that any

victims who were not able to feed into the original Parole Board hearing because they were not contacted will be part of any new process?

**Mr Gauke:** It is possible for this decision to be appealed. It will certainly not be appealed by my Department. In terms of the timing, my understanding is that the Parole Board is likely to proceed on the basis that this is the judgment in place. I do not think there is more that I can say at this stage.

**Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I welcome the Court's decision and hope that rule 25 will be abolished without delay. One way to make Parole Board decisions more transparent is greater involvement of victims—for example, by consulting them about licence conditions, using video links for them to give evidence, advising them about the impact of their victim statement on board decisions, and a simple right of appeal without victims having to go through lengthy and complex judicial reviews. Will the Secretary of State commit to those measures?

**Mr Gauke:** The hon. Lady makes a number of important points, and I would particularly highlight the issue of victims and licence conditions. We need to look closely at that, and it follows on from the previous question by my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening). Ensuring that licence conditions reflect the concerns of victims is important.

**Anna Soubry** (Broxtowe) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State for his statement and his swift response to today's judgment. It is absolutely the case that he should not have brought a judicial review, but equally, we cannot have a system whereby we rely on victims—victims of a serial predatory sex offender—to keep us safe. The primary role of Government is to keep the people safe. Will he look at ensuring we have a system that does that? What assurances can he give us that there are not other cases where the Parole Board has released people who have been deemed dangerous in circumstances where it should not have?

**Mr Gauke:** The reconsideration process is a way of ensuring that decisions by a Parole Board panel can be tested very thoroughly. On other cases, I have requested that the Department look closely at circumstances where there is a decision to release a category A prisoner directly. That happens very rarely—I think there have only been six in recent months—but I have sought the Department's reassurance that there is nothing to be concerned about in those cases.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am particularly pleased that the Secretary of State says that other civil legal action will be taken into account in future. I have written to the Department about a case where this is relevant. I had a reply from the Department which is full of errors. I wrote back on 19 January. I have not had a reply. Please could I have a meeting?

**Mr Gauke:** Yes, I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady.

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con) *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Ah, the good doctor—Dr Julian Lewis.

**Dr Lewis:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Does not the Worboys case illustrate the fact that there is a culture of consideration for rapists and murderers that puts the

public gravely at risk? Will the Secretary of State be investigating the case of the two murderers who killed two people in two separate incidents in their own homes and who have just been convicted of the horrific rape, torture, throttling and murder by burning in a car while she was still alive of a young Vietnamese woman—not to mention the imminent release of another criminally insane individual who is being groomed for release in his guise as a woman, having previously been convicted of stabbing to death a young woman in her own home more than 66 times?

**Mr Gauke:** I suspect that a number of Members will have read about the case to which my right hon. Friend refers, which was covered this morning. Clearly it raises a number of issues. My focus has been on the particular circumstances of the Worboys case and the fact that there was a lack of probing of the information that should have been taken into account in making a risk assessment. These risk assessments are difficult, and sometimes they will be got wrong, but it is our responsibility to ensure that the processes are robust.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): I sincerely thank the Secretary of State for meeting my constituents Mr and Mrs Mullins and their daughter Louise last month, following the release of the man who killed their son 30-odd years ago. They were failed by the Parole Board as well. Will the Secretary of State reassure me today that, as we discussed in the meeting, victims must be front and centre of any forthcoming review?

**Mr Gauke:** Yes, I will. In terms of the victims aspect, that review will, I hope, be completed by the end of April. I hope to make good progress on that. Meeting Mr and Mrs Mullins and their daughter, thanks to the good offices of the hon. Lady, highlighted how important this issue is for victims and their families.

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): How will the Secretary of State establish a balance between open justice for the system under which the Parole Board operates and at the same time preventing it from effectively operating as trial by media, because of the activities of the media around famous cases such as this one?

**Mr Gauke:** My hon. Friend draws out exactly the tension that we have to resolve. We need to be more transparent; the House rightly demands that. In doing so, we must recognise that it is the Parole Board that would review the documentation and should do so very thoroughly, probe carefully, then reach its conclusion. If those processes are thorough, we have to support the Parole Board in delivering that.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Like everyone else, I welcome today's ruling. This has, however, been an unnecessary mess, with a somewhat unfortunate scapegoat in Nick Hardwick. The real problems that have been uncovered are processes and rules not fit for purpose, a lack of support for victims and underfunding. The measures the Secretary of State has outlined, including the judge-led internal reviews, are of course welcome, but given that he does not have enough judges to serve the current case load timeously, how will he ensure that their additional role will not delay trials any longer than they are currently delayed?

**Mr Gauke:** What I would say is that it is really important to get this system working well. In many cases, it does work well—in many cases, the Parole Board is making difficult decisions, and in the vast majority of cases, it gets them right—and there are times when we need to recognise and support that. Unfortunately, however, this case has revealed that some things went wrong, and they need to be addressed.

**Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con):** Rule 25 did not exist for most of the years that I conducted litigation on behalf of the Parole Board, and I must say that I welcome its demise. I thank the Secretary of State for taking such timely action, and for making such a thorough statement today. However, I ask him to remember that Parole Board hearings often happen many years after an offence and that victims will have moved on. While it is right that we have open justice—the press are rightly interested in probing how the system works—it is also very important to protect victims, who may well be starting to move on from what has happened to them. In that respect, I urge him to look at the excellent recommendations made by the Justice Committee, which should have reached his in-tray today.

**Mr Gauke:** I will, as always, look very closely at the excellent recommendations of the Justice Committee.

**Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab):** The Court said that the wider context of Worboys' offending was not taken into account by the Parole Board. When the Secretary of State draws up his new rules, will he ensure that they take into account the perpetrator's actions after he has been in prison? In Worboys' case, he continued to appeal against his sentence, refused to admit liability in a civil case and finally admitted his guilt only nine months before his first Parole Board hearing, thus ensuring that he piled further agony on to his victims. Although Parole Board decisions should not be decided on the basis of campaigns, does he accept that it is the duty of the House to ensure that justice is seen to be done? It certainly was not done in this case.

**Mr Gauke:** I accept that hon. Members are perfectly entitled—indeed, it is our responsibility—to make many of these points. When it comes to the assessment of risk—is someone safe to be released?—that is the job of the Parole Board in these circumstances. Somebody's behaviour after they are imprisoned is clearly relevant, and such a consideration should be taken into account.

**Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con):** For more than two years, I have raised with Ministers, and raised in this House and indeed in the Justice Committee, the issue of the lack of transparency in the case of Colin Pitchfork, who brutally raped and murdered two schoolchildren in my constituency in the 1980s. It was an unprecedented case because it was the first time in English criminal history that an individual—he pled not guilty—was convicted on the basis of DNA evidence.

I strongly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, and I fully understand the reasons he has given for not raising a judicial review procedure. It would have been ludicrous to ask for a judicial review against the Department for which he is responsible. May I, however, ask him for a simple assurance that he will ascertain the timing of

the Parole Board for Colin Pitchfork, so that I and my constituents can understand whether the procedure will be the current one or the new one that he is proposing?

**Mr Gauke:** My hon. Friend is a tireless campaigner on behalf of the families of the victims of Colin Pitchfork, and I will see what information I can glean on the particular case. As I have said, when it comes to transparency, I hope that we will be in a new position in a handful of weeks' time.

**Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab):** I am sure everyone accepts that the Secretary of State acted in good faith, but can he explain to the wider public who do not have a legal background why, when he acted on the advice that the victims had the best chance of success, the Government then spent a small fortune employing a top-notch QC to defend and justify the secrecy provisions that the victims' case was based on challenging?

**Mr Gauke:** Just to explain, there were two cases brought by the victims: one was on the substance of the decision, and one was on rule 25. On the substance of the decision, my Department did not oppose the victims. We stood back, and indeed we did nothing to hinder the victims, as I assured the House on 19 January. On rule 25, I had made it clear that I felt it needed to be changed. I considered that to be a matter for this House and for my Department, rather than that the previous rule was unlawful. I thought it was wrong; I did not think it was unlawful.

**Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con):** I welcome the tenor of the statement that the Secretary of State has made. Given that many of us welcome the result achieved by the victims, will he reassure me that he will not oppose any requests from them for costs?

**Mr Gauke:** I assure my hon. Friend that the victims' costs will be paid from the public purse.

**Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab):** My admiration for the courage of the victims knows no bounds, but they really should not have been put in the position of having to pursue this in this way. They have been let down by different sections of the Government, and what was missing from the statement was any sense of apology to those victims for the actions that they have been forced to take because various parts of the Department failed. The Secretary of State referred to the number of cases that the Parole Board have to consider, but this was not any old case; it was a very high-profile one, and there have been serious failings in decision making. Will he take this opportunity to apologise to the victims for the many failures that left them having to pursue justice because no one else would do it for them?

**Mr Gauke:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that this was no ordinary case. This case should have been dealt with much more effectively. At the Parole Board hearing, there should have been much greater probing and much greater testing of the case that Worboys made, and I deeply regret that that did not happen. I share the anger that he feels at the fact that victims therefore had to go through this process, and I am sorry that that happened.

## Point of Order

12.27 pm

**Angela Rayner** (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Further to my point of order on Monday, it is important to place on the record that the Government have now tabled a new instrument, replacing the previous regulations, to give effect to their policy on nursing students.

As you will recall, Madam Deputy Speaker, today is not only my birthday, but the final day for praying against the regulations. I was concerned that Ministers would simply let the clock run down and prevent a meaningful vote from being held, but I am very glad to report that that will not now be the case. I want to put on the record my thanks to Mr Speaker, and I note that his advice was clearly heard in the Government Whips Office.

When the Opposition pray in good time against a statutory instrument on a controversial policy issue, we are entitled to call for a debate and a vote on the Floor of the House so that every Member gets a say and our constituents can hold us to account. The role of a legislator is to legislate, and I hope you agree, Madam Deputy Speaker, that this should set a clear precedent for the future that allows us to do exactly that.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I thank the hon. Lady for giving notice that she would raise this matter. I understand that the Government have tabled a motion to revoke the regulations she had prayed against and that they plan to lay replacement regulations in due course. I do not think I should be drawn on whether this is a precedent, but she has put her view on the record. I am of course happy to pass her comments on to Mr Speaker. Finally, I wish her a happy birthday.

## BILL PRESENTED

### RATING (PROPERTY IN COMMON OCCUPATION) AND COUNCIL TAX (EMPTY DWELLINGS)

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Secretary Sajid Javid, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Greg Clark, Mel Stride and Rishi Sunak, presented a Bill to make provision, where two or more hereditaments occupied or owned by the same person meet certain conditions as to contiguity, for those hereditaments to be treated for the purposes of non-domestic rating as one hereditament; and to increase the percentage by which a billing authority in England may increase the council tax payable in respect of a long-term empty dwelling.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 192) with explanatory notes (Bill 192-EN).*

## Marriage (Same Sex Couples) (Northern Ireland)

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

2.29 pm

**Conor McGinn** (St Helens North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for the marriage of same sex couples in Northern Ireland; to make provision in the law of Northern Ireland for the conversion of civil partnerships to marriages and for the review of civil partnership; to make provision for the legal recognition of the marriage of armed forces personnel overseas and of other marriages solemnised outside Northern Ireland; and for connected purposes.

I speak in the House today with great pride in the people and cause on whose behalf I bring in this Bill, but also with reluctance and—strange as it might sound—some disappointment. I say that for two reasons. First, this measure is long overdue. Northern Ireland is the anomaly in these islands when it comes to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights. My constituents in St Helens and people in London, Dublin, Cardiff and Edinburgh can all get married to the person they love, but same-sex couples are denied that basic right in Northern Ireland. That is a wrong that must finally be corrected.

Secondly, this measure should be enacted in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Let me say clearly that that is my strong preference. I know that Members across the House desperately want to see the power-sharing institutions restored at Stormont. However, the Assembly being in cold storage should not mean that Northern Ireland remains a cold house for LGBT rights. The de facto suspension of the devolved legislature does not mean that equality for same-sex couples can be suspended indefinitely, because rights delayed are rights denied.

It is for those reasons that I, Members right across the House and the Love Equality campaign demand that this House, this Parliament and this Government act. My contention is that we can derive a legitimate mandate to do so on this issue, because the people of Northern Ireland and their elected representatives in Stormont have spoken in favour of same-sex marriage. In November 2015, the Northern Ireland Assembly voted in favour of a Bill proposing to introduce same-sex marriage, and every poll of the public in Northern Ireland has shown broad support, with 60% to 70% consistently in favour. Alongside that, the majority of the parties support same-sex marriage. The Alliance party, Sinn Féin, the Social Democratic and Labour party, the Green party and senior figures in the Ulster Unionist party all favour the introduction of equal marriage. They contend that change is needed and that, in the absence of an Assembly, Westminster must act.

This is not about people being nationalist or Unionist; it is not even about people being gay or married. It is about people being equal. The Love Equality campaign represents a broad cross-section of the community in Northern Ireland, including Amnesty International, the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the National Union of Students and the Union of Students in Ireland, the Rainbow Project, Cara-Friend and Here NI.

[Conor McGinn]

In bringing in the Bill, I and other Members seek not to usurp the democratic institutions or civic society of Northern Ireland but to support them. There are, of course, those who oppose equal marriage and do not wish to see it extended to Northern Ireland. It is their right to hold those opinions, but it is not the right of anyone—any MP or any political party—in holding such opinions to deny, block or denigrate the rights of others.

I am a practising Catholic, although my parish priest would undoubtedly say that I probably need to practise a little bit more. I am not a theologian and this is not a church, but I have been asked whether or not, given the position of the Church hierarchy, the Bill conflicts with my personal faith. Let me say this as gently and appropriately as possible. The God I know is one of love, compassion and understanding. In showing that to others, in standing up for the marginalised and those who are denied their rights, I believe I am living the message of the Gospel in this holy week. I want to be clear that the position of the Churches in Northern Ireland will be unaffected by the Bill. They will not be compelled to perform same-sex marriage ceremonies or to recognise same-sex marriages in the structures of their respective Churches.

Attitudes have changed in Northern Ireland and on the island of Ireland. In the rural Armagh village of Camlough, sage advice and solace is to be found in the local hostels of Doyle's, Quinn's and Trainors. There people will find the finest wines, ales and minds. For me, they have always been a good barometer of what the elusive man on the street thinks about the issues of the day. On a recent and, these days, rare visit, I chanced to encounter one of these wise men—a gruff, agricultural, straightforward south Armagh man. He said to me, “Young McGinn, I see you are helping out the gays. Sure, I'm all for this gay marriage. They're entitled to be as miserable as the rest of us.” Another asked, “You see this equal marriage—will they be able to get equal divorce, too?” The point is that when they are making jokes about it, it is clearly accepted and part of the fabric of everyday life. The people understand this; it is the law that remains stuck in the past. LGBT people are the sons, daughters, brothers and sisters of our friends and neighbours. This matter is fundamentally about people and their rights.

My friend and occasional aide-de-camp, James Winston, is a well-known and respected figure here at Westminster. Unlike Downing Street advisers, I am not in the business of outing people, but it will not come as a shock to anyone who knows him when I tell the House that he is gay. What might be more surprising is that when he was a young man in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, homosexuality was still illegal. Despite being decriminalised in Britain in the late 1960s, it was not until the 1980s that it became legal in Northern Ireland. James is a proud Ulsterman and has devoted much of his life to working for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland, but I know, as his friend, that it cuts him to the quick that he had to leave home as a young man because he was gay and that the prohibition of same-sex marriage means that, to this day, he is not considered equal in the land of his birth.

My friend Peter Magee grew up on the same street as us in Bessbrook. He lives with his husband in New York, but when he gets off the plane in Belfast his marriage is not recognised. I contrast that with another friend, Alan Gemmell, for whom I acted as best man when he got married in Scotland. He was able to marry the man he loved in the place he calls home in front of his friends and family.

Later today, I will join Cara McCann, Amanda McGurk and other campaigners to present petitions in support of equal marriage in Northern Ireland to 10 Downing Street. The more than 42,000 people who have added their names to those petitions all have their own reasons for demanding marriage equality, but I want to highlight the case of Cara and Amanda. They have been in a loving relationship for almost five years and got engaged just over a year and a half ago. Like many couples, it is their dream to build a happy life together as a married couple, based on their shared love and values. But they cannot. Does anyone think that is fair? Does anyone think that is right? Does anyone think that can continue?

Madam Deputy Speaker, and dearly beloved Members gathered here today, if any person knows of any reason why Cara and Amanda cannot be joined together in matrimony, let them speak now or forever hold their peace. This is the opportunity for anyone in this House who objects to equal marriage to do so. Let them stand up here, make their case and bring it to a vote. That is my challenge, because today is not about symbolism. My efforts and those of my friend Lord Hayward in the other place are not gestures. In a short while, we will know the will of the House on this matter. If it supports equal marriage, which I believe it will, the Government will have a moral and political duty and imperative to act.

I was born and raised in Northern Ireland and I now proudly represent the English seat of St Helens North in this House. People where I live—my constituents—and people in London, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Dublin have the right to marry the person they love, but the very same right is denied to people where I grew up. In 2018, that is not only unjust; it is unacceptable.

This Bill is not just an instrument to advance LGBT rights in Northern Ireland; it is a litmus test on the will of this House to uphold equality and fairness. It is high time we acted, and I hope that today will be the first step on what must be a short road to bringing about equal rights for our fellow citizens. It is a matter of fundamental inequality and unfairness and a denial of rights that same-sex couples in other parts of the UK and Ireland are allowed to marry, but that Cara McCann and Amanda McGurk are not. Cara and Amanda have a civil partnership ceremony booked for Valentine's day next year. My Bill would pave the way for them to be married instead.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Ordered.*

That Conor McGinn, Wes Streeting, Karin Smyth, Ged Killen, Yvette Cooper, Owen Smith, Layla Moran, Caroline Lucas, Nicky Morgan, Justine Greening, Nick Herbert and Ms Angela Eagle present the Bill.

Conor McGinn accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 May, and to be printed (Bill 193).*

**Ged Killen** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think the will of the House is now clear in respect of the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn). I seek advice on whether you have had any notification from the Government of their intention to come to the House to make a statement on how they intend to proceed to introduce same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I have not had any such notification, although I would point out that the Bill has only just this minute gone through. Those on the Treasury Bench, however, will have heard the hon. Gentleman's comments.

**Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am very proud of my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) for that powerful speech. Earlier today, my constituent Richard Angell arrived in Parliament wearing a rainbow flag to support the campaign, but was asked by House security to remove it. It was confiscated until he left. I am sure the individual officers of the House were just following the rules, but I wonder whether you can clarify whether that was the appropriate course of action. If they were following the rules, can you give us some advice on how the rules might be revised, so that this powerful symbol of equality can be worn throughout our Parliament?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point of order. I will certainly look into the matter he raises and get back to him.

## Business without Debate

### EUROPEAN UNION DOCUMENTS

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 119(11)),*

#### DRINKING WATER DIRECTIVE (REASONED OPINION)

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. 5846/18 and Addenda 1 to 5, Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the quality of water intended for human consumption (recast); considers that the proposal does not comply with the principle of subsidiarity for the reasons set out in the annex to the Eighteenth Report of Session 2017-19 of the European Scrutiny Committee (HC 301-xviii); and, in accordance with Article 6 of Protocol No. 2 annexed to EU Treaties on the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, instructs the Clerk of the House to forward this reasoned opinion to the Presidents of the European Institutions.—(Rebecca Harris.)

*Question agreed to.*

### DELEGATED LEGISLATION

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),*

#### REGULATORY REFORM

That the draft Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) (Custodial Premises) Subordinate Provisions Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 22 January, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

*Question agreed to.*

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),*

#### DATA PROTECTION

That the draft Data Protection (Charges and Information) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 20 February, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

*Question agreed to.*

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),*

#### TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT

That the draft National Minimum Wage (Amendment) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 5 February, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

*Question agreed to.*

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),*

#### HOUSING

That the draft Insolvency of Registered Providers of Social Housing Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 7 February, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

*Question agreed to.*

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),*

#### CUSTOMS

That the draft Finance Act 2003, Part 3 (Amendment) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 5 March, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

*Question agreed to.*

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),*

#### INCOME TAX

That the draft Scottish Rates of Income Tax (Consequential Amendments) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 12 March, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

*Question agreed to.*

# Opposition Day

[UN-ALLOTTED DAY]

## Local Government Funding

2.44 pm

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House believes that local government has severely suffered as a result of almost eight years of brutal and devastating cuts; notes with concern that the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that between 2010 and 2020 local government will have had direct funding cut by 79 per cent; is concerned that the top ten most deprived councils in England are set to see cuts higher than the national average, with nine on course for cuts more than three times higher than the national average; believes there is a risk that services and councils are reaching a financial breaking point; calls on the Government to act on the warnings of the National Audit Office and initiate a review into the funding of local government to ensure that the sector has sustainable funding for the long term and to immediately provide more resources to prevent more authorities following Conservative-run Northamptonshire into effective bankruptcy; and further calls on the Government to report to the House by Oral Statement and written report before 19 April 2018 on what steps it is taking to comply with this resolution.

The motion calls on the Government to respond to the challenges faced by local government. I want to start by paying tribute to councillors of all political persuasions and none, and to council officers and staff, who have risen to those difficult challenges over the past eight years, making really tough decisions but ones that have often sought to protect public services. As I will come on to explain, all levels of local government are now saying that the cuts have to end or local government will collapse.

I am proud of my own roots in local government, having served on Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council for 12 years before coming to this House. My wife is a Tameside councillor approaching her 19th year of service. I know the very difficult decisions that she and her colleagues continue to have to make because of the decisions taken by Members of this House and this Government.

For those without the first-hand experience, the work of local government, as the Secretary of State recently put it, may seem small in the grand scheme of things, but to consider those working at the coalface in local councils as merely cogs in a machine to make the jobs of politicians in Westminster easier is a failure to recognise the real value, the responsibility and the pride shown by our local leaders.

**Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): In May, I will cease to be a councillor after eight years as a member of Redbridge London Borough Council. In my borough and, I suspect, every other Labour authority up for election this year, Conservative candidates will be out there attacking them for council tax increases that have been forced on them to protect public services from the savage cuts of this Tory Government. Is that not an example of the utter hypocrisy of the Conservative party: anti-cuts campaigners locally, while in this place cheering those cuts and voting them through?

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Of course, part of the reason—two sides of the same coin—is that there have been eight years of cuts from this place to local councils, meaning that council budgets have shrunk. It is also this place that has allowed councils to increase council tax. This year it increased the limit by a further 1%, which means that it is merely shifting the blame on to local councillors of all political persuasions—and this is not a party political point.

**Mr Marcus Jones** (Nuneaton) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I will give way in a moment, but I am responding to my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting).

That is why it is so unfair: the Government have devolved the cuts and devolved the blame. They have sought to distance themselves from decisions for which each and every Member on the Conservative Benches is directly responsible.

**Mr Jones:** I remind the hon. Gentleman that council tax is less in real terms than it was in 2010. Does he not believe he should think about his party's own record? Between 1997 and 2010 council tax doubled.

**Andrew Gwynne:** And I remind the hon. Gentleman that council spending has been less in real terms since 2010. In the decade to 2020, my own local authority of Tameside will have lost close to £200 million of Government funding. That is unsustainable and he has some responsibility for that because of his votes.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that particularly perturbing are the cuts to children's services? Every single local authority leader, regardless of party, is screaming out for more money for children. Cuts to children's services, particularly those for very young children, have such a long-term impact. We must give every single child the best start in life.

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right: if ever cuts had consequences, they manifest themselves in the problems faced by our children's services.

**John Stevenson** (Carlisle) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Andrew Gwynne:** Not just yet, as I am still answering my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West). What we are seeing in all councils that are responsible for children's services is the real increase in demand, and I will talk a bit more about that later. This is coming not just from me but from the Tory-controlled Local Government Association, which says that children's services require an extra £2 billion of funding. That is quite clear. It is coming from county councils, metropolitan district councils and unitary councils, and from the Special Interest Group of Municipal Authorities and the County Councils Network, as well as the Tory-controlled LGA. Everybody is singing from the same hymn sheet, yet when it comes to the priorities of this Government, when they were faced with a choice in the November Budget, what did they choose? A £5 billion tax giveaway through the bank levy and to

vote down an Opposition amendment in which we pledged to put the £2 billion into children's services—exactly where the Secretary of State's own Tory councillors are saying it needs to go.

**John Stevenson:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con):** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Andrew Gwynne:** No, I will make a bit of progress. *[Interruption.]* I have taken three or four interventions already and I am only on page two of my speech. A little bit of patience is perhaps needed from Government Members.

The fact is that for politicians of all political persuasions and none in local government, the sense of pride and responsibility is why many of us came into politics—to make our world a better place for the people we grew up with, our neighbours, our family and our local communities. It is therefore saddening that this debate is even needed today.

**Maria Caulfield:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I will just move on. The fact is that since 2010, local government has borne the brunt of the public spending cuts. Since 2010, 49.1% of central Government funding has been cut from local government—*[Interruption.]* It is interesting that the Parliamentary Private Secretary is giving his Back Benchers cue cards and whispering in their ears about what to say.

**Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con):** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I will not—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Gentleman cannot think of his own intervention without the help of the Parliamentary Private Secretary, it is probably not worthy.

Metropolitan district councils have seen a reduction in spending power of 33.9% in real terms—

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. The hon. Gentleman will give way if he wishes to, but we must hear his speech.

**Andrew Gwynne:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Metropolitan district councils have seen a reduction in spending power of 33.9% in real terms from 2010 to 2017-18. Over the same period, county councils' spending power has fallen by 22.1%, but spending power masks the true scale of the cuts to Government grants. This is having a drastic impact on council services. Youth centres, museums and libraries are having to close. Our social care system is in crisis. Compared with 2010, there are now 455 fewer libraries, 1,240 fewer Sure Start centres and 600 fewer youth centres.

**Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con):** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I will, if the hon. Gentleman can defend closing 600 youth centres.

**Huw Merriman:** It is all well and good for the hon. Gentleman to talk about the difficulties from 2010, but the reality is that many of those difficulties have been

caused by the Labour Government's policies. I was a district councillor for eight years. I know how tough it was. Take some responsibility for what you delivered.

**Andrew Gwynne:** As I say, I was a councillor for 12 years, 11 of which were under a Labour Government, and we had 11 years of growth in our local authority. That was something to be proud of. However, the Government's record gets worse—

**Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab):** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I will.

**Emma Hardy:** I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for his excellent speech—*[Interruption.]* No, I feel that the atmosphere in here ignores the very real consequences of what we are talking about. I have mentioned before that in my constituency there are 140 more looked-after children who have been taken into care because they have not had that early intervention and early support. Government Members can laugh and joke and make this into some sort of comedy show, but I am sorry; we are talking about the impacts on real people's lives. Real people's lives are being changed forever because of this Government's actions, and I do not think that it is a laughing matter!

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend is right to be angry. When the public watching this debate see Tory MPs laughing, sneering and smirking at our public services in crisis, they will know what side the Tories are on, and it is not theirs.

**Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, because this is an important debate. Yes, the Liberal Democrats are now on the Opposition side—*[Interruption.]* Listen! We were on the Government Benches to say that we needed to tighten our belts, but for a long time now we have said that enough is enough. We are seeing the impact on our local services. We cannot stand by any longer. You all must have constituents coming—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. The Speaker referred to this the other day: we really must not use the word "you." Hon. Members have to address one another through the Chair. There is a reason for that, so I urge the hon. Lady and all hon. and right hon. Members to ensure that that convention stands.

**Wera Hobhouse:** I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. Those on the Government Benches should understand what we are doing to our local services. They must have constituents coming to their surgeries—

**James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con)** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. That is a very long intervention. I call Andrew Gwynne.

**Andrew Gwynne:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) is right that these cuts have gone far too far. Many of my constituents, though, will not forgive the Liberal Democrats for the part they played in pushing through the deepest austerity in the coalition Government. Many of those

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hard choices have resulted in some of the increases in demand that we are now seeing, particularly in children's services and adult social care.

**Maria Caulfield:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I will.

**Maria Caulfield:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way; he is very generous. I understand his call for more funding for local government, but can he explain why Labour Members voted against the local government finance settlement, which gave councils more money?

**Andrew Gwynne:** Because it is a fact that the local government finance settlement went nowhere near the gaps that have been created by the hon. Lady's party in local government. We do not support ongoing austerity. We want to ensure that we reinvest in our public services, and that is why I hope she will join us in the Lobby tonight. If she believes in defending public services and wants to see more money for our local councils, she can support our motion tonight, and I look forward to her being in our Lobby.

House building has fallen to its lowest rate since the 1920s and homelessness is rising. The number of people sleeping rough on our streets has more than doubled since 2010—[*Interruption.*] The Secretary of State can chunter, but I do not think that doubling the number of rough sleepers is a record for the Housing Secretary to be proud of. Older people are not living with the dignity and comfort that they deserve because of the cuts to social care. The outsourcing of public services has led to one scandal after another, and the collapse of private outsourcing companies such as Carillion has put services at further risk. Demand for children's services is placing growing pressure on all councils. Central Government funding to support children and their families has been cut by 55% since the Conservatives came to office.

**Mr Marcus Jones:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Andrew Gwynne:** Well, if the hon. Gentleman can say where the extra £1.7 billion that has been cut from children's services will be made up from, I look forward to hearing his suggestion.

**Mr Jones:** The hon. Gentleman is critical of outsourcing, but can he say whether he ever supported or endorsed private finance initiative contracts or outsourcing during his time as a councillor?

**Andrew Gwynne:** The fact is that—[HON. MEMBERS: "Yes or no?"] The fact is that the privatisation of our council services has been a catastrophic failure. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the next Labour Government will introduce new rules to allow councils that want to to fully in-source their services without let or hindrance by the Government, because we support publicly owned, publicly accountable public services.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Andrew Gwynne:** I will give way to the hon. Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson), who has been so patiently bobbing at the back for the past however many minutes.

**John Stevenson:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way so generously. In Cumbria we had the opportunity for a devolution deal. It did not happen. In Cumbria we had the opportunity to reduce the number of councils and councillors, which would have meant savings of around £25 million, which could have been spent on frontline services. The reason for the failure was Labour councils and Labour council leaders. Does the hon. Gentleman not think that was a failure of the Labour party?

**Andrew Gwynne:** Of course, the hon. Gentleman did not want to tell me where the £1.7 billion for the shortfall in children's services was coming from. I know that in Cumbria there is a shortfall in funding for children's services, as there is in every other county council in England. Every metropolitan district council in England and unitary councils across England are all saying the same thing. Perhaps he ought to speak up for Cumbria and get the extra money for Cumbria's children's services.

The result of the cuts has been appallingly clear. Cuts to early years intervention have meant a record number of children, some 72,000—let us stop and think about that—taken into care last year. The number of serious child protection cases has doubled in the last seven years, with 500 new cases launched every day. More than 170,000 children were subject to child protection plans last year—double the number seven years ago.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend, I too was a councillor—for 25 years. Does he agree that the removal and slow cutting of early intervention services, specialist family services and support and grants for charities that support people and families in the community over the past seven or eight years is part of the reason why too many children are coming into children's services, too late and with too many serious problems?

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We had numerous debates in the Parliament from 2010 to 2015 about children's services and in particular the cuts to Sure Start. I think Sure Start had the basis for being one of the previous Labour Government's greatest achievements, had it been allowed to remain in place, fully funded in the way that Labour intended. What used to gall me the most was Member upon Member on the Government Benches saying that Sure Start was a waste of money and did not work. Sure Start was never intended to be a quick fix. Government Members can tell me in 20 years' time, when the children and parents who went through Sure Start are parents and grandparents themselves, whether Sure Start worked or not. I believe that one of the biggest tragedies of the David Cameron era of Government was the slash-and-burn approach to early years.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Andrew Gwynne:** I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) again.

**Emma Hardy:** One of the issues facing our schools is the number of children attending who are not classified as school-ready. There are increased numbers of children

with oracy problems and children starting school who are not toilet trained, which increases the impact on our schools' resources.

**James Cartlidge** *rose*—

**Emma Hardy:** That is because of the lack of support for children from health visitors and Sure Start services. Does my hon. Friend not think it is time for the Government to reverse those cuts if they are genuinely committed to giving every child the best possible start? Or can only children from families with the money to pay for it have the best possible start?

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is the short-term approach of this Government and their predecessor, the coalition. However, making short-term savings in a particular year has resulted in massive cost and demand increases further down.

**James Cartlidge** *rose*—

**Andrew Gwynne:** I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, as he keeps trying to intervene on interventions.

**James Cartlidge:** When interventions transmute into speeches, some of us get a little frustrated. The point is that difficult decisions had to be made when in 2010, we were faced with the highest budget deficit since the war. The hon. Gentleman is effectively saying that we should have protected the Department for Communities and Local Government budget, just as we chose to protect the NHS. What taxes would he have increased or what other Departments would he have cut to pay for that?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I will take no lectures from a Member who voted to cut the bank levy by £5 billion. I politely point him towards the “Grey Book”, which we published with our manifesto, “For the many, not the few”—I am sure it is well thumbed on the Government Benches. In our manifesto we pledged to give, this year and every year, an additional £1.5 billion for local councils and where we—*[Interruption.]*

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid):** I will tell him.

**Andrew Gwynne:** The Secretary of State says he will tell me. I am glad that he is looking into Labour policy development. Perhaps he ought to consider his own policy development on these matters, because the Government are so woefully lacking in any such proposals. Our proposal was fully costed, with £500 million for early years, £8 billion for social care—

**James Cartlidge** *rose*—

**Andrew Gwynne:** I will not give way again, because I am answering the hon. Gentleman's question. What we proposed, when put together, is a far better deal for our children, our elderly and our councils than what the Conservatives have been able to come forward with.

**Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op):** Does my hon. Friend agree that it is about time that we bust the Tory myths about the economic shock that this country faced? The reality is that the economy was

growing when Labour left office. It was the absurd austerity policies of the Tory party that prolonged the recession and made it worse, giving us what is now the longest recovery in our country's economic history.

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and it cannot be said often enough. When the Gordon Brown Government ended, the economy was growing again. That is a statement of fact. *[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State chunters again about “the deepest recession”. I think he will find that the global crash started in the United States of America—something that even his former Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, now acknowledges.

**Catherine West:** My hon. Friend is making some great points. Does he agree that the children's services crisis has been worsened by the 1% pay freeze over the last eight years? I hope we hear good news at the end of this debate from the Minister about pay increases for those workers being brought in line with the NHS pay increases.

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend makes a really important point. I will come to some of those issues later, but her point is very well made, because we have not only seen the hollowing out of our local services. We have also seen the impact of that on local government as a whole.

I know that that is an inconvenient truth for Ministers, and I am sure that when the Secretary of State responds, with his pre-prepared speech, he will say that I am making overtly political points. That seems to be his stock answer. He seems to forget that it is the job of the Opposition to point out the Government's failings, of which there are many in local government policy. However, it is not just the Labour party saying this; it is the National Audit Office. Surely the Government recognise the National Audit Office as a reputable organisation that knows what it is talking about. The NAO has told us what the Government's policies mean. They mean that one in 10 councils with social care obligations will have exhausted their reserves within the next three years. They mean that the Government's short-term fixes are not working and that local government still has no idea how its finances will work after 2020. It is about the cost of negligence being paid for by communities across the country. Vital services are cut, and because the Government shift the blame on to local councils, giving them so-called flexibility but then criticising them when they use it, council tax bills are increasing.

Planning and development, the National Audit Office has shown, has been cut by 52.8%. If we are to meet the Government's ambitious targets for new homes, who will be the planners of the future? Who will identify the land to be built on? Who will process the planning applications? Who will be the enforcement officers to ensure that the homes and other buildings are built in accordance with the plans?

Funding for transport has been cut by 37.1%. These are our bus routes. These are the vital links between our communities. These are our roads, our pavements, our cycleways. I note that Conservative Members are now silent about that.

**James Cartlidge** *rose*—

**Andrew Gwynne:** I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

**James Cartledge:** It is extremely kind of the hon. Gentleman to give way, but it must be said that he is continuing the same argument. When we had the deficit, we chose to protect the NHS and had to make other difficult choices. He is effectively saying that Labour would have protected the budget of the Department for Communities and Local Government. He must therefore tell us what other budgets he would have cut, or what taxes he would have increased, to pay for that protection.

**Andrew Gwynne:** I think that people listening to the hon. Gentleman's intervention will find it hard to believe that he protected the NHS, for a start. However, I am glad that he has intervened on the issue of transport. It is rather ironic that he has come here and said that we would want to protect local government. He is damn right we want to protect local government, but so does his Defence Secretary. His Defence Secretary took to Twitter a couple of weeks ago decrying the fact that Conservative-controlled Staffordshire County Council was removing bus services from his constituency—the same Defence Secretary who voted for the cuts in this place.

**Emma Hardy:** One of the impacts of the transport cuts is the declining number of apprentices, who find it difficult to travel to college to complete their apprenticeships because of the cost of local transport. In their manifesto, the Conservatives promised to give apprentices subsidised local travel. This is another instance in which their promises have failed and they have failed to deliver, because they are apparently incapable of any joined-up thinking.

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, but this does not just apply to transport. It applies to food safety, and to day-to-day services such as street cleaning and the emptying of bins. It applies to our museums, our heritage, our cultural services and our libraries: the glue that holds together the fabric of our local communities. I do not support the Government's notion that they can go on cutting vital day-to-day services without those cuts having an impact.

**Paul Scully** (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I will come back to the hon. Gentleman, if he will allow me. I need to draw my remarks to a conclusion, but I will take a few more interventions before I do so.

It is not just the National Audit Office that is making these comments. Back in 2015, the Institute for Fiscal Studies was warning that deprived areas were suffering from the harshest council cuts. The Government called for councils to spend their reserves and sell off their assets. Tory Northamptonshire followed that instruction to a T, and look where it got them.

As local government leaders warned of the coming crisis in adult social care, the Government said "town halls are hoarding billions in their piggy banks".

The *Municipal Journal* said recently, in response to this toxic situation:

"This is a wholly unsustainable position, and has already led to speculation about the long-term futures of four other counties which have used significant cash reserves in recent years: Surrey, Lancashire, Somerset and Norfolk."

All I can say is that if the Surreys of this world are now struggling and pleading poverty to the Secretary of State, heaven help the Liverpools, the Manchesters, the Birminghams, the Tamesides and the Hulls of this world.

**Wera Hobhouse:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is very generous. Does he agree that if there is to be wholesale reform of local government funding, it should at least be fair, and should not punish areas that are already more deprived than others? There must be a fair funding formula, but that is not what is currently proposed.

**Andrew Gwynne:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Anything that comes out of the mouths of Ministers that contains the words "fair" and "funding" sends shivers down my spine.

**Hugh Gaffney** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very important speech. I should say that I am currently a member of a council, and as a councillor I know about the effect that the cuts are having. In Scotland, £1.5 billion has been slashed from local government since the Scottish National party came to power. Does my hon. Friend agree that the nationalists are simply a conveyor belt for the Tory austerity that is continuing in Scotland?

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend can speak very well about his experiences in Scotland. Tory austerity south of the border is driving local councils to the edge of a financial cliff, and I am very sorry if that is being replicated north of the border by the SNP Government in Holyrood.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Andrew Gwynne:** I must make a little more progress. I will give way once more before I finish my speech.

It is little surprise that when we talk to Conservative Members in private they are just as concerned about what is going on in their own local communities as Labour Members are in public. It is not just the Opposition who are expressing concern about what is happening across local government; the IFS, the NAO and the media that cover local government are all saying the same things, as are members of the Conservative party.

Ensuring that vulnerable children have the protection that they need should not be a party political matter, which is why I am grateful for the work done by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) to highlight the crisis in children's services. Both the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and the current Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, the right hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd) have campaigned against library closures. As I said earlier, the Defence Secretary has expressed concern about the cutting of bus services by Tory-controlled Staffordshire County Council—and he is right.

The Government can talk the talk on social mobility, supporting apprenticeships and investing in local communities, but at the moment—as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy)—people who live in rural areas and want to find work or apprenticeships cannot travel because there are no local transport services

for them to use. I agree with the Defence Secretary. I only hope that he will be in the Lobby with us today, supporting his Twitter petition. For many years we have argued for a change of direction while the Government have stuck their head in the sand.

**Mr Sweeney:** Does my hon. Friend agree that what has been displayed today, in the most spectacular fashion, is total Tory economic illiteracy about what this country has faced? Had the Tory party continued with Labour's stimulus plan, we would have restored the public finances at a far faster rate than can be achieved through a self-defeating austerity project.

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The evidence was there when we left office, and the almost immediate impact of Chancellor George Osborne's turning off the taps was apparent for all to see.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Andrew Gwynne:** I will not give way again.

Today's vote offers all Members on both sides of the House an opportunity to send a very clear message to the Government and the Secretary of State: the message that things must change as a matter of urgency, that our vital public services should be properly funded, and that our communities need and expect their councils to deliver the services that they want to see. I hope that all Members will join us in the Lobby to stand up for their communities, their public services, and—yes—their councillors, too. This is not just about Labour councillors, but about Conservative, Liberal Democrat and independent councillors: everybody who serves our communities in the town and county halls across England.

The Government need to think again about the impact of their reckless and short-sighted approach to council funding. Northamptonshire is the first, but it almost certainly will not be the last. For local government, money tomorrow is no solution to a crisis happening today. I urge all right hon. and hon. Members to support us in the Lobby. I commend this motion to the House.

3.20 pm

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid):** I welcome the opportunity to respond to this debate and to set the record straight on the Government's support for local government and the communities that it serves. First, however, let me take this opportunity to express my condolences to the family and friends of Councillor Clarissa Slade—one of the youngest councillors in the country, who died, sadly, earlier this week.

Every day, dedicated councillors and officers in local government deliver vital services on which we all depend: on that much, the shadow Secretary of State and I agree. I have the highest regard for them. They are, quite simply, at the frontline of our democracy and the foundation on which strong, thriving communities are built. That said, these have been challenging times for local government, although it has been notable how impressively many councils have stepped up to make hard-earned taxpayers' money go much further—not just protecting services, but often improving them. The fact that satisfaction levels among residents have remained broadly steady is

testament to that. However, I recognise, of course, that these hard-won gains have been achieved in a very difficult financial climate.

**Maria Eagle** (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): What does the right hon. Gentleman have to say to Liverpool City Council, which has lost 64% of its Government funding so far? We have not even reached 2020 yet.

**Sajid Javid:** I hope that the hon. Lady will appreciate what I am about to come on to: an understanding of how we got into this situation and how we can avoid getting back into it. Liverpool City Council is part of the Liverpool city region, which has been getting a lot more money recently—especially for investments, to encourage growth and jobs. If other members of the Liverpool city region, such as Wirral, for example, stopped wasting a quarter of a million pounds every year on some council *Pravda*, perhaps they would spend money more efficiently.

**Alberto Costa** (South Leicestershire) (Con): My right hon. Friend mentioned a moment ago that he is going to explain how we got into this position. Will he elucidate what was meant by the last Labour Chief Secretary to the Treasury in the note that said that there was no money left?

**Sajid Javid:** I thank my hon. Friend, who brings me to precisely the point I was about to make, which will help explain exactly why the last Labour Chief Secretary left that note for his successor.

In considering how this climate was created, we need to step back and remember what the Government inherited in 2010: the biggest budget deficit in peacetime, of £150 billion, and Labour's great recession—the deepest in almost 100 years. If that was not enough, there was also the biggest banking bail-out ever: just one bank bailed out to the tune of £50 billion.

**Catherine West** *rose*—

**Sajid Javid:** If the hon. Lady is going to apologise for what Labour did, I will give way.

**Catherine West:** I thank the Secretary of State for his joke. It is not down to Members who were not in the House to apologise.

What is the right hon. Gentleman's Department's estimate about how many more Northamptonshires we are going to see in the next four years? Will 10, 20 or 30 local authorities crumble? How many chief execs will have to write their own notes about there being no money left because of the Tory cuts?

**Sajid Javid:** The hon. Lady says that it is not for her to apologise, but she stands there supporting the party that brought this country to its knees economically. It was responsible for the largest, deepest recession that this country has seen for 100 years—a recession, by the way, that led to an increase in unemployment of half a million people. Go and tell them that it is a joke.

The Labour party fails to recognise the gravity of the situation that it created in this country and the legacy that it left behind. It is no exaggeration to say that thanks to Labour, our country was on the brink of

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bankruptcy. Had it been allowed to continue in office, had we continued down that road, all public services, including local government, would have been decimated.

**Wes Streeting:** I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. This is obviously a rehearsal for the local election campaign.

As he knows, people on these Benches have held a mirror up to our party over the issue of anti-Semitism. The Secretary of State does not need any lectures about Islamophobia, not least given his recent experiences. However, I ask him to hold a mirror up to his party, given the disgraceful campaign in London two years ago and because of the dog-whistle politics already being seen in the London election campaign. Islamophobic material has even been shared by Conservative Members of Parliament. We all have to root out prejudice in our politics, and that includes the uncomfortable experience of holding a mirror up to our own parties and our own values.

**Sajid Javid:** I am not sure what that has to do with the debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I am happy to answer the hon. Gentleman's question, if that is okay with you—he made the point in good faith. He is right about the importance of making sure that we all in the House, regardless of whether we are Back Benchers, Front Benchers or leaders of political parties, respect each other at all times, whether during election campaigns or not. I very much agree with him on that. I heard him speak very passionately just a couple of days ago in Parliament Square, when he rightly emphasised the point. I very much agreed with him then, too.

**Mr Jayawardena:** Following what my right hon. Friend has just said, I have seen—I think we all have—targeted and in some cases public campaigns against hard-working councillors and officers of councils by some, sadly, in the Labour party. Is my right hon. Friend concerned about reports that councillors are being intimidated simply for considering how best to deliver for their residents?

**Sajid Javid:** I am very concerned about the intimidation of councillors, which is, of course, wrong at every level. Decent Opposition Members will recognise the intimidation that there has been, especially in London, of Labour leaders. Just yesterday, there were reports of a meeting of the hard left neo-fascist Momentum group, which was trying to remove Wandsworth councillors. We have all heard about Claire Kober, who was removed from Haringey Council—and who, by the way, talked about the sexism, intimidation and bullying that she suffered, including the anti-Semitism in her own party that seems to be defended by the Leader of the Opposition at every opportunity. We have also heard about Warren Morgan in Brighton and Hove, and about Jon Clempner. The list goes on. I very much agree with my hon. Friend that we all have to end this kind of intimidation in politics, but this is particularly a lesson for the Labour party.

**Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab):** Along with every other Member, the Secretary of State must have noticed the rise in homelessness across our communities. This is happening not just in our cities but in our towns and

even our villages. Does he agree that some of the cuts to peripheral services such as mental health services, housing services and Sure Start centres have contributed to this rise in homelessness, which had been greatly reduced under the Labour Government?

**Sajid Javid:** I share the hon. Lady's concern about the rise in homelessness. It is almost 50% lower than it was at its peak in 2003, but it is still too high, and she is right to point out that it has been rising. All hon. Members should be concerned about that. This is why it is important that we should continue to help those programmes that can prevent homelessness and those that can help those who find themselves in that difficult situation. She might be pleased to know that a recent pilot in Southwark of some of the measures that will be put in place across the country in April as a result of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which had cross-party support, has resulted in a one-third fall in homelessness acceptances. I hope that those are the kinds of measures that we can all support.

**Maria Caulfield:** I tried to intervene on the shadow Secretary of State earlier to ask about Labour's proposals to raise money for local councils through a land value tax, which is also known as a garden tax. Such a tax would see families whose properties were worth £300,000 paying an average of £4,500 a year. What is the Secretary of State's view on those proposals?

**Sajid Javid:** I am pleased that my hon. Friend has raised that point. A moment ago, I talked about how Labour had brought our country to the brink of bankruptcy and how, given the chance, it would do it all over again. She has just illustrated that point. All that Labour knows is borrow, borrow, borrow and spend, spend, spend, and it wants hard-pressed taxpayers to pick up the bill. She mentioned Labour's garden tax. It is interesting that the shadow Secretary of State did not want to dwell on that, but it appeared in Labour's 2017 manifesto, and it was calculated at the time that it could result in a charge of £3,700 a year for the average home, which is roughly £2,000 more than the current band D council tax. That reminds me that the hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) was recently sacked from the shadow Front Bench for exposing Labour's plans to double council tax. So the facts are out there, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point.

**Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab):** Will the Minister give way?

**Sajid Javid:** I will give way in a moment.

It has taken titanic efforts to turn the situation round and rebuild our economy, with both central and local government having to find new ways of delivering essential services while delivering value for money. The country cannot afford a return to Labour's ways of spend, borrow and bust.

**Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab)**  
*rose—*

**Sajid Javid:** Perhaps this is another hon. Lady who wants to apologise.

**Helen Hayes:** I was not planning to intervene on the Secretary of State, as I am hoping to speak later, but the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) talked about

Labour's proposals for a land value tax, and I want to correct the record on that. The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee is currently undertaking a cross-party inquiry into the merits of the land value tax, which has been tried and tested in many European countries and which has many variants. I hope that the Secretary of State will take seriously the recommendations of the Select Committee when we report in due course.

**Sajid Javid:** The hon. Lady gives me the opportunity to highlight Labour's tax plans once again. She says that Labour is not considering a land value tax, but perhaps she is not aware of what Councillor Sharon Taylor of the Local Government Association Labour group said just a few days ago, on 20 March. She said that she would like to see increased freedoms for councils from day one of Labour Government and that this should include

"the ability to look at local taxes such as land value tax"

and a tourism tax. Labour's plans are all about tax, tax, tax. That is the only thing it knows.

There is no doubt that local authorities are stepping up to the challenges that they face and demonstrating real ambition and creativity to drive efficiencies at the same time as protecting frontline services. Let me share a few examples with the House. Suffolk County Council has used advanced technology to understand what is behind the service pressures generated by troubled families. Since that work began, the council has saved some £10 million and increased the capacity of its system to focus on priority cases. South Cambridgeshire has set up its own housing company to provide innovative solutions to meet local housing need. The company will expand its portfolio of properties, investing approximately £100 million over the next five years. This will generate an additional £600,000 per annum for the council.

Many councils have taken a more radical approach to restructuring to do better for their communities. The benefits can be enormous when local areas look beyond lines on a map and party differences and find new ways to work together. That is what Suffolk Coastal and Waveney district councils have done to create a new district council: East Suffolk. That culmination of years of collaboration is expected to yield annual savings of more than £2 million. There are also mergers of Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury to form West Suffolk, which is estimated to generate a saving of over £500,000 each year, and of West Somerset and Taunton Deane to form Somerset West and Taunton, which will lead to transformational change and annual savings of some £3 million.

**Mike Amesbury:** Will the Secretary of State clarify something? Given the pressures facing local government up and down the country, why has £817 million in underspend been given back to the Treasury?

**Sajid Javid:** I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that he is demonstrating his ignorance of how Government financing works. If he really thinks that that is issue, perhaps he can explain why that figure includes £65 million for affordable housing returned by the Mayor of London? Has he asked his colleague that question? Perhaps he can also explain why in Labour's last full year in office, when the current shadow Housing Minister, the right

hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), was the Housing Minister, £240 million of housing and regeneration funding was returned?

**Ruth Cadbury:** The right hon. Gentleman lists several initiatives by several councils, but how many of those initiatives will make up the £6.8 billion by which the cross-party LGA estimates that councils will be in deficit? His Government have kindly offered £1.3 billion, so how will all those initiatives make up that enormous gap? I do not believe that it is possible. Finally, what has he done to ensure that his Department is no longer the worst funded of all Departments? It is facing the greatest cuts, and the greatest number of services across the pitch are being affected.

**Sajid Javid:** I will come on to the local government financial settlement shortly, but if the hon. Lady is so concerned about the resources that local government receives, why did she vote against a real-terms increase for the next two years for local authorities? She can perhaps reflect on that while she waits.

Returning to the reforms that councils are making, some authorities are opting for unitarisation. In Dorset, for example, the nine existing councils will be abolished to create two new unitary councils, generating annual savings of approximately £28 million. I have announced that I am minded to replace the existing five councils in Buckinghamshire with a single council for the area, which could generate savings of £18 million.

**Sir Edward Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Despite all the efficiency gains that some local authorities can generate, some authorities are in genuine difficulties, as we have seen in Northamptonshire. What advice would the Secretary of State give to Members and council leaders where councils are struggling to balance their budgets and are considering section 114 notices? How should such considerations be linked to Members of Parliament so that we can work together to tackle the difficult situations that many communities are dealing with?

**Sajid Javid:** I do not know whether the right hon. Gentleman was present for the statement I made yesterday on Northamptonshire County Council, but the independent inspector specifically concluded that the situation was not due to a lack of funds but to the mismanagement of funds and other issues. However, the right hon. Gentleman makes a wider point that councils can face certain financial difficulties even if they are managing their finances well, and those councils should rightly make maximum use of the available flexibilities. If they want to go further, they can try to get the support of local people through a referendum. In the longer term, we need a fair funding review, to which the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) recently referred, to ensure that the system distributes funding more fairly. The recently closed consultation received some 300 representations, and will be going through them.

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): In his comments on the wider fiscal position, the Secretary of State has failed to mention the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, who was sacked by the Prime Minister for gross incompetence—a decision with which the Secretary of State presumably agrees.

[Gareth Thomas]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and the Secretary of State for Defence have run very public campaigns for more funding for their Departments. When will the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government develop some cojones and do the same for local government?

**Sajid Javid:** If the hon. Gentleman listens to the rest of my speech, perhaps he will appreciate the issues and challenges on financing and how they are being addressed.

I referred a moment ago to some of the changes that councils are bringing about in their structure, and it is important in all those cases that the changes are led from the ground up. Where that is the case, we will not hesitate to work with those councils and to take them seriously.

**Mr Marcus Jones:** The quantum of local government finance and fair funding across the system is extremely important, but does the Secretary of State agree that how money is spent is also extremely important? I use the example of the appallingly run Labour Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council, which has overspent by £1.5 million on setting up a council depot. Does not money have to be spent in a better way?

**Sajid Javid:** Typically, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point. He speaks from his years of experience as a Local Government Minister, and he cites the excellent example of misspending by Nuneaton. Further up the road from Nuneaton, he could equally have picked Birmingham City Council, which has been in a shambles because of repeated mismanagement by a Labour administration. We shall see what the verdict of the electorate is in a few weeks' time.

**Wera Hobhouse:** Of course nobody in this House would condone mismanagement of council finances, but Northamptonshire's biggest budget overspend was on adult social care and children's services. It was not mismanagement by the council as such.

**Sajid Javid:** I would be happy to send the hon. Lady a copy of the inspector's report to read. She will see that the inspector was clear in his independent analysis that the problem for Northamptonshire was not a lack of funds.

**Paul Scully:** My right hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech about why local choices matter and about trusting councillors. We heard earlier about the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service campaigning against a library closure. That library, Hatch End library, is in Labour-run Harrow—the other half of his constituency is in Hillingdon—so Labour Members might want to speak to the shadow Chancellor, who enjoys all his libraries not only being open but having been refurbished over the past few years because his constituency is in Conservative-run Hillingdon. Local choices matter.

**Sajid Javid:** My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, and the shadow Chancellor is very lucky to live in a Conservative-run borough—perhaps he secretly votes Conservative in council elections to keep it that way.

**Gareth Thomas:** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) referred to my local authority and omitted to mention that Hillingdon Borough Council gets double the funding of Harrow Borough Council. How can I get that appropriately reflected in the record?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** That is not a point of order but a point of debate. A lot of people want to speak in this debate, so Members should not raise spurious points of order. If the hon. Gentleman wants to intervene on the Secretary of State, he can do so.

Interventions should be short from now on, because there is a lot of pressure on time.

**Sajid Javid:** We recognise that our support to councils means nothing without the right funding and resources. To that end, we published the final settlement for funding local authorities in England a month ago. The settlement equates to a real-terms increase in resources to local government over the next two years—once again, it is worth reminding the House that it was a real-terms increase that the Labour party voted against. This settlement forms part of a four-year settlement that gives English councils access to more than £200 billion in funding in the five years to 2020. That gives councils greater freedom and flexibility over the money they raise, in recognition of the fact that no one knows their local areas—the opportunities, challenges and pressures there—better. This settlement strikes a balance between relieving growing pressure on local government and ensuring that hard-pressed taxpayers do not face ever-increasing bills.

**Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con):** Does my right hon. Friend share my frustration that, as happens on police funding and the NHS, on local government Labour raises lots of concerns about a lack of funding and then votes against the solution? Does he think that in the upcoming local elections people should judge the Labour party on its deeds, not its words?

**Sajid Javid:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We saw the same again recently on the cut in stamp duty; Labour talks about helping people to buy their first home, yet it voted against a cut in stamp duty. There are many such examples and it is incumbent on all of us in this House to make sure we know what Labour really stands for.

The settlement comes in the third year of a four-year deal that was accepted by 97% of councils in return for publishing efficiency plans. As I said earlier, many councils have made the most of the certainty and stability this offers to plan ahead and drive commendable efficiencies. We will continue to work with the sector to not just deliver better value for money, but really transform services. In all, this settlement answers calls from councils, over many years, for greater control over the money they raise and the tools to make this money go further. This is the approach we have taken across the board: listening to local authorities and responding to what we hear.

**James Cartlidge:** On greater control, in Suffolk we are very pleased to be one of the 10 pilot areas for the 100% retention of business rates. Has my right hon. Friend given any consideration to allowing councils to set the level of business rates?

**Sajid Javid:** I will come on to discuss the pilots in a moment, but the good thing about them is that all the local authorities involved, including Suffolk, will now be able to experiment and see what they can do to help raise those local rates by having more incentives for businesses and attracting more businesses to the area. One clever way of getting more revenue is by getting more businesses into the area.

As we look at the resources of local authorities, we need to start looking at creating a whole system of local government finance that will be fit for the future. The current formula for financial allocations had served local areas well over the years, but a world of constant change, with big shifts in demographics, lifestyles and technology, demands an updated and much more responsive way of distributing funding. That is why there are questions over the fairness of the current system, which is why I was pleased to launch a formal consultation on a review of councils' relative needs and resources in December. That closed recently and I am grateful to everyone who responded. This was not just a paper exercise; we have an unparalleled opportunity here to be really bold and ambitious; to consider, with the sector, where the most up-to-date data and evidence lead us, and to create a new system that gives councils the confidence to fully grasp the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead. We aim to introduce this new approach in 2020-21.

That is also when the latest phase of our business rates retention programme will get under way. It is a programme that gives local authorities powerful incentives to grow their local economies, and so far it has been a resounding success. Councils will keep some £2.4 billion more of their business rates next year alone; this a significant revenue stream, on top of their core settlement funding.

**James Heapey (Wells) (Con):** The retention of business rates is indeed a huge opportunity for councils such as Somerset's, which was so disappointed not to be part of the business rates retention trial. Will the Secretary of State reassure us that all that he has learnt from his review of the funding formulas will be applied to how business rates retention is baselined, so that county council areas with smaller economies are not disadvantaged by the retention of business rates when it is introduced in full?

**Sajid Javid:** Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that reassurance. I shall say more about how the system is going to work in a moment.

Our aim is to go further and for local authorities to retain 75% of business rates from 2020-21, as we work towards 100% retention. With that in mind, in December I announced an expansion of the 100% retention pilots that have proved so popular. More than 200 authorities came forward to bid for the new 100% business rates retention pilots that we are going to run in 2018-19. I was pleased to respond to that enthusiasm by doubling the number of initial pilots to 10, covering some 89 authorities. The 10 that we have selected, taken alongside the existing pilots, give a geographic spread to help us to see how well the system works across a broad range of areas and circumstances. The pilot areas will keep 100% of the growth in their business rates if they expand their local economies—that is double what they

can keep now. There will also be opportunities for others to get involved, with a further bidding round for pilots in 2019-20, which will open in due course.

**Alberto Costa:** I thank my right hon. Friend for making that point. Would he encourage Leicestershire County Council and other well-run Conservative-led councils to make further bids for the pilots?

**Sajid Javid:** Yes, I would certainly encourage all those councils that are creative and innovative, and that want to support local businesses and to look at new ways of funding and delivering services, to bid when we open up opportunities for new pilots.

**Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab):** Like businesses, councils need stability, particularly with Brexit happening. Will the Secretary of State inform the House why his Department has not bid for any of the Government's pot of funding to prepare for Brexit, to help councils?

**Sajid Javid:** My Department is very much involved in the preparations for Brexit. We have attended several recent EU exit committee meetings and we are involved. The hon. Lady should wait and see what happens. In due course, she will learn more about my Department's approach.

In expanding the pilots, we have responded to what councils have told us, and we are doing the same in other areas. For example, the housing infrastructure fund recognises the crucial role that councils play in helping to deliver the homes that our country desperately needs, by providing billions in additional finance to support new development. We all know that we cannot achieve the new housing we need without having in place the right infrastructure, including schools, healthcare facilities, transport links and other essential types of infrastructure. We have received a staggering 430 bids, worth almost £14 billion, to deliver 1.5 million homes. That demonstrates the incredible ambition out there to tackle the housing crisis—an ambition that we are keen to get fully behind; hence our move to more than double the housing infrastructure fund at the autumn Budget, in which we dedicated an additional £2.7 billion, bringing the total to £5 billion. I was delighted recently to announce the first funding allocation of £866 million for 133 projects that will help to unlock some 200,000 additional homes. The work under way with a total of 45 local areas to deliver major infrastructure projects worth £4.1 billion could potentially deliver an additional 400,000 homes.

In his remarks earlier, the shadow Secretary of State talked about house building having fallen to its lowest levels since the 1920s—I think that is what he said. He is right about it having fallen to its lowest level since the 1920s, but he is wrong about when it happened. It happened in the last year of the previous Labour Government, when the current shadow housing Minister, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), was the actual housing Minister. Since then, it is up by more than 50%.

I recently announced almost £300 million of funding for housing deals in Greater Manchester, the west of England and Oxfordshire, and a housing deal for the West Midlands. The West Midlands deal backs the mayor's ambitions to build some 215,000 homes by

[Sajid Javid]

2030-31. Isn't Andy Street doing a fantastic job, Madam Deputy Speaker? You do not have to answer that. Those deals represent another important step towards meeting one of the defining challenges of our time, as do the measures we are taking on social care.

**Ruth Cadbury:** In the last year of the Labour Government, there were 40,000 social housing starts. How many were there in the outgoing financial year?

**Sajid Javid:** Since 2010—since the change in Government—more than 300,000 affordable homes have been built. The hon. Lady mentioned the previous Labour Government and social housing. Interestingly, she did not point out that under the previous Labour Government, who were in power for 13 years, the number of social housing units for rent fell by 421,000. If she was really interested in this, she would stand up again and apologise—

**Ruth Cadbury** *rose*—

**Sajid Javid:** If the hon. Lady is going to apologise, I will take her intervention.

**Ruth Cadbury:** Does the right hon. Gentleman not recognise that the net loss of social rented housing was because of right to buy? I do not have a problem with the scheme in itself, but had the councils been able to replace the homes that had been sold under right to buy, there would have been no net loss of social rented housing in this country. Will he also answer the question that I just asked?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. May I say again that interventions need to be very short? I am sure that the Secretary of State will want to bring his remarks to a close soon without too many more interventions. If Members want to speak in this debate, they must bear in mind that we need to move on.

**Sajid Javid:** I suggest kindly to the hon. Lady that she reflects on the fact that more council houses have been built in the past seven years than were built in the previous 13 years of a Labour Government.

**Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con):** The Secretary of State listed some of the initiatives to encourage house building, but he did not include the land release fund, which has helpfully just given £4 million to Paignton to help get three housing projects under way.

**Sajid Javid:** I apologise to my hon. Friend for not listing that particular fund; there are just so many places where we are taking action to make sure that this country deals with the housing crisis—the housing crisis that was left behind, as he knows, by the previous Labour Government.

Let me turn now to social care. I am under no illusions about the pressures that councils face in addressing this issue. It is one of the biggest social issues that we face in our country, which is why we have put billions of pounds of extra funding into the sector over the past 12 months. We have also announced a further £150 million for the adult social care support grant in 2018-19. That will be allocated according to relative needs, and will

help councils build on the work that they do to support sustainable local care. It comes on top of an additional £2 billion that was announced in the spring Budget for adult social care over the next three years. With the freedom to raise more money more quickly for the use of the social care precept that I announced this time last year, we have given councils access to some £9.4 billion of dedicated funding for adult social care over the next three years. However, we know that there is still much more to do and that that funding alone will not fix this issue, as it is a long-term challenge that requires long-term systemic change. The publication of a Green Paper this summer on future challenges within adult social care will set us on a path to securing that change.

**Emma Hardy** *rose*—

**Sajid Javid:** I will take one final intervention.

**Emma Hardy:** I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. I am sure that everyone welcomes the extra money for adult social care. Will his Department also look into giving extra money for children's services?

**Sajid Javid:** Another important issue is, of course, children's social care. Although some £250 million of funding has been dedicated to that sector since 2014 to help with innovation and to deliver better quality services, the recent local government financial settlement, which will lead to a real-terms increase over the next two years, will also help. None the less, I do recognise that there are longer-term challenges, and that is something that my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary is taking very seriously.

Undoubtedly, these have been very challenging times for local government, but we know what Labour's response to that would be: it would be throwing more money at the challenge without a second thought. Never mind the working people who actually foot the bill for raising that extra money through more and more taxes. Instead, we ask councils to raise their game as we strive to rebuild the economy after the disaster that we inherited in 2010, and we back those councils not just with funding, but with greater freedom, flexibility and certainty so that they can harness their invaluable local knowledge and transform services. Many have done just this—driving efficiencies and innovating while continuing to provide a world-class service, and delivering lower taxes in real terms since 2010. Services have not just been protected; in many cases they are improving. Communities are being empowered through billions of pounds of local growth funding and devolution deals. These councils are doing an excellent job, and the people they serve deserve no less.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Before I call the Scottish National party spokesperson, let me again say that there is huge pressure on time in this debate. Therefore, after the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) has spoken, I will impose a six-minute time limit to start with. I urge colleagues to bear that in mind.

4 pm

**Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP):** I join the shadow Secretary of State and the Secretary of State in paying tribute to councillors across the nations of the UK for the work

that they do. It is an undervalued job. Those who do it correctly often spend long hours serving their constituents diligently, and often at odd hours of the day and night. It is important for us all to reflect on that. As a former councillor and council leader, I am well aware of the pressures on individual councillors and on budgets.

The shadow Secretary of State quite rightly pointed the finger of blame for the problems of local government at the austerity that has been imposed on local government by this Tory Government. I absolutely agree with him. I was encouraged that he focused on that aspect when replying to the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), because I also want to talk about the situation in Scotland.

The UK Government Budget did not present a good deal for Scotland, as a consequence of real-term cuts to Scotland's revenue block grant for day-to-day spending of over £200 million next year. Despite a commitment of over £300 million of resource funding for the NHS in England this year, Scotland will receive only £8 million in consequential cuts in 2018-19 due to UK Government cuts elsewhere. Of the additional money that the UK Government announced as being added to Scotland's budget, over half—£1.1 billion—comes from financial transactions that the Scottish Government cannot spend on frontline public services and that have to be repaid to the Treasury.

Austerity has not ended. Over the eight years of this UK Government—between 2010-11 and 2017-18—and onwards to 2019-20, we will see Scotland's discretionary budget fall in real terms by £2.6 billion. That is 8.1%. Scotland continues to be hit by UK austerity and the decision to leave the EU. The Scottish Government have actually protected local government budgets and vital public services in the face of this austerity onslaught. Compare what the Scottish Government have done with the 49% real-terms cuts to English local authority budgets.

In Scotland, total resource funding for local government has increased by a total of £170 million in this year's budget, providing local authorities with an above inflation increase, before taking into account the ability to increase the council tax. Some £35 million will be transferred to local authorities this year using agreed distribution mechanisms. The remaining £135 million will be in the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2018. This figure includes a specific resource grant of £10.5 million agreed with Orkney, which will receive £5.5 million, and Shetland, which will receive £5 million, to address funding for inter-island ferries.

While the Tories in Scotland propose cutting over £556 million from public services to pay for their tax cuts for the wealthiest, the SNP Government deliver for councils and protect the vital local services in the areas that we all hold dear, especially in my own constituency in the highlands. The SNP's progressive reforms on income tax—with 70% of people paying less than they did last year and 55% paying less than they would if they lived south of the border—are vital for allowing this funding increase, despite the continued austerity that is being imposed.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful point about taxation. Council tax on an average band A property in

Scotland costs £1,208 per year, whereas a band A property in England costs £463 more, at £1,671. Is it not clear that England is the highest-taxed place in the UK?

**Drew Hendry:** My hon. Friend makes a good point. Indeed, the average cost of a band A property is some £400 more in England than in Scotland—5.1% up on last year.

The Scottish Government's progressive budget also provides extra funding for our NHS, our education and—even though it is a reserved matter for this Parliament and Ministers here—the push to make sure that we have done more on broadband coverage in Scotland. There is more money for our economy, for research and for our environment, too, as well as for protecting important things like free university tuition, free personal care for the elderly, free school meals and free prescriptions—among many other items.

**Mr Sweeney** *rose*—

**Drew Hendry:** I am happy to give way—I have been waiting for the hon. Gentleman's intervention.

**Mr Sweeney:** The hon. Gentleman describes the SNP's recent budget as “progressive”. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities says that councils need £545 million just to stand still, yet the budget settlement imposed by the SNP was just £159 million. That yawning gap has not been filled. How can that possibly be progressive?

**Drew Hendry:** I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has intervened, because I was expecting him to do so. I was a former group leader at COSLA, so I have been watching for a number of years the Scottish Government manage to put money into local authorities in a way that could not be done down here. In fact, in the last debate on local government that I took part in in this Chamber, Tory MPs were talking about their councils having to hand back the keys to Treasury Ministers such were the cuts. Actually, one of the biggest challenges in Scotland is dealing with the private finance initiative legacy left by Labour in terms of the additional interest costs on all these different items that continue to drain local authority resources.

I want to turn to Highland Council, because it is on my own patch and I speak from experience. Highland Council's resource budget for our services such as schools, roads and housing rose to almost £450 million for the coming year—an increase of over 2% compared with last year. While the Scottish Government protect local authority budgets, the UK Government leave them paying the price for the austerity agenda.

Highland Council is a good example of the impact of universal credit on local authority budgets. As many Members will know, the constituency of Inverness was a pilot area. We went through the live service and then full service roll-out in June 2016. Local agencies, the council and I have been voicing concern about these issues since 2013, and the measures introduced do not even scratch the surface of the process failings of universal credit. Our local authorities are paying the price now, and right hon. and hon. Members in this Chamber who go through full service roll-out will see the effect on their own local authorities.

[Drew Hendry]

Let me reflect on the cost to Highland Council of the impact of rent arrears. Average rent arrears for somebody on universal credit are now £840. Average rent arrears for somebody not on universal credit are £250. The effect of that is that in July 2016 rent arrears were £1.6 million. In March 2017, that figure rose to £2.2 million, and then in December 2017, it rose to £2.7 million, racking up the costs for local authorities, which are having to implement and deal with the effects of universal credit. This will have an effect on services as it starts to drain their budgets.

The extra resources needed for administering the change to universal credit are running into hundreds of thousands of pounds—money that is coming out of the council budget. The welfare support team do amazing work, but they are flat out with demand. Housing officers are also flat out with demand, as more people face housing crises. Some 29% of landlords already say that they have evicted because of universal credit rent arrears. People are becoming homeless, so the local authority has a duty to house them. It is a vicious cycle of costs for the local authority. The increased demand then affects other agencies such as Citizens Advice.

The impact on poverty is also very harsh. One in four children in Scotland is growing up in poverty as a result of this Government's austerity regime. As household incomes are pushed, people find themselves relying more and more on local authority services. Highland Council, especially its welfare support team, has done incredible work in the face of the most trying difficulties.

The SNP Government are committed to mitigating Tory austerity wherever they can. Since 2013, the Scottish Government have spent more than £100 million a year to protect people from the worst aspects of Tory welfare cuts. We are fully mitigating the bedroom tax in Scotland, and we have pledged to abolish the tax completely when we have the powers to do so.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making the SNP's fundamental point, which is that it would be far better for us as an independent country to be making the right decisions in the first place than having to spend £100 million to correct the Tories' errors.

**Drew Hendry:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. As ever, he makes a telling point: choices would be different in Scotland. We would choose not to have to mitigate something as horrendous as the bedroom tax, which was so ill thought out that the Tories did not take into account the fact that there are virtually no houses in the highlands and islands that do not have more than one bedroom.

Since its establishment, the Scottish welfare fund has helped more than 275,700 households. The fund provides crisis grants when someone experiences a disaster or emergency and community care grants to enable independent living. We have also extended the Scottish welfare fund on an interim basis to mitigate the UK Government's decision to remove housing benefit for 18 to 21-year-olds. In 2016-17, more than 17,500 applications for crisis grants were made because

of delayed payment of benefits—that is around 10% of all applications. Between July and September 2017, that increased to 14%, clearly showing the impact of the Government's harsh welfare cuts.

We have restored the council tax support cut in Westminster through the creation of council tax reductions, protecting the incomes of more than half a million people on low incomes. We have extended the child allowance in the council tax reduction scheme by 25%, benefiting 77,000 households by an average of £173 a year, or £15 a month. That boost for low-income families will help nearly 140,000 children across Scotland.

Following the UK Government's decision to scrap the UK-wide scheme, we have safeguarded support for 2,600 disabled people through the Scottish independent living fund. We have now created an extra £5 million fund to support young disabled people to make the transition into adulthood.

To conclude, I urge the Minister to listen to hon. Members and to stop shifting the responsibility for his Government's austerity agenda on to local authorities across the nations of the UK.

4.13 pm

**Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): I listened carefully to the words of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, and I must say that his claims that the Government support local government and that they believe all changes should be led from the ground up will ring very hollow in Christchurch, where he has announced his decision to abolish an independent sovereign council, which has been in existence effectively since 1216, against its will. Back in November, he said that there was insufficient local consent. The local council then decided to hold a local referendum, in which 84% of the people voting were against the council's abolition and the enforced merger with Poole and Bournemouth. Yet, despite that, the Secretary of State decided, after the poll had been announced, that there was now sufficient local consent.

The Secretary of State has asserted, incorrectly, that savings will be made all across Dorset as a result, yet we know that just on the issue of the negative revenue support grant, Dorset stands to lose over £10 million a year. Despite having received assurances in private from him that that would be sorted out, we have still to see the detail and see whether he will deliver on that assurance.

Back in December 2015, my right hon. Friend's predecessor, who is now the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, assured the House that the Government would not abolish councils against their will. The Government have reneged on that promise, to their eternal shame, and have in so doing encouraged council chief officers to be distracted from their responsibilities to deliver good-quality local services.

One of the perverse consequences of the Government's policy drive towards unitarisation is the destruction of small local councils that have been prudent and are debt-free, as is Christchurch. Christchurch has raised from local tax payers the money that is necessary, while the neighbouring authorities—Poole and Bournemouth—that are now going to take it over, together with its assets, artificially held down their council taxes for many years. The consequence is that the council tax in Bournemouth and in Poole is about £200 less at band D

than it is in Christchurch. Those authorities are being rewarded for putting forward false budgets, while Christchurch is being penalised for having been prudent and responsible.

The Secretary of State is intent on adding insult to injury by forcing tax payers in Christchurch to carry on cross-subsidising those in Poole and Bournemouth even after the unitary authority is established. That will, for example, force my constituents in one of the poorest council estates in the whole of the west country to subsidise people living in Canford Cliffs and Sandbanks.

It is totally unacceptable and, frankly, a cause for shame that I, as a Conservative Member of Parliament who campaigned against this, have been let down very badly by my own Government. This has not been helped by the fact that the Department has kept on moving the goalposts. Originally, officials at the Department assured section 151 officers across Dorset that harmonisation, as it is called, over 20 years would be perfectly acceptable. Last autumn, they changed their view, and their advice then was that it would be for a maximum of five years, while I was told by a departmental official that it would be two years at the longest, and that it might be less.

We still cannot get any firm information from my right hon. Friend or his Department about the period of harmonisation they have in mind. However, it seems that the consultation that went out some 18 months ago, based on a 20-year harmonisation period, was a false prospectus. It has caused people across Dorset to reach a conclusion on the basis that they would all be much better off financially, when in fact they will not be; that particularly affected people in Poole.

My right hon. Friend has told me that he will try to limit exit payments for local government officers to £95,000, in accordance with the Government's pledge. At my behest, he did go off and ask council officials in Dorset about that, and the response from them was, "Bollocks!" and "We have worked our bollocks off—no way are we going to allow our exit payments to be limited to £95,000."

The savings being suggested are unreasonable, and this is all leading to a failure and breakdown in good-quality local government. As I think I have probably made clear during my speech, I am an extremely dissatisfied bunny as Easter approaches, because I believe in localism.

4.19 pm

**Maria Eagle** (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I rise to support the motion in the name of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and other right hon. and hon. Friends, in particular the part that suggests that "councils are reaching a financial breaking point"

and calls on the Government to

"initiate a review into the funding of local government to ensure that the sector has sustainable funding for the long term".

I am sorry that the Secretary of State is leaving at this point, because I hoped he might listen to what Back Benchers have to say—but apparently not. I think the level of cuts is too great and threatens the very future of local government as we know it.

Two councils cover my constituency of Garston and Halewood. Liverpool has lost 64% of its central Government funding, or £420.5 million in real terms since 2010. At the beginning of the Lib Dem coalition

Government—I am sorry the Lib Dems have absented themselves, because they cannot absolve themselves of responsibility for the cuts that have happened and that continue to happen as a consequence of the Government they supported and were in—we lost £350 million from Building Schools for the Future, £127 million from the housing market renewal initiative, and all the money that recognised the levels of deprivation in Liverpool.

Consequently, the council now has 3,000 fewer staff. It has taken out most of its middle management and saved £5 million a year by cutting the performance-related bonuses of its remaining staff. Councillors' allowances have been frozen since 2010 and special responsibility allowances have been cut by 10%. There remains a £90 million gap to be filled over the current three-year period.

The other authority, Knowsley, is smaller but has been bashed equally hard by the Government. It has lost 45% of its Government funding so far, which is over £100 million. That is £485 for every person in the borough, which is double the England average of a loss of £188. Consequently, the authorities are struggling to meet the requirements they have to support their residents.

The future the authorities face will be even more difficult, because by 2020 Government grant will be cut further and they will have to rely on council tax and business rates. Liverpool has the further disadvantage that 60% of its properties are in band A—the lowest yielding council tax band—and 90% in bands A to C. The money raised by council tax in Liverpool is £72 million below the average UK figure. It can raise only £1.4 million for every 1% increase in council tax.

The council tax base is such that it will never be as easy for a city like Liverpool to do as well as more affluent areas on the basis of council tax and business rates alone. Last year, 72% of Liverpool City Council's funding came from Government grant and only 11% from council tax. It has to spend more on adult social care than it can raise in council tax. That is the situation it faces. It is doing what it can. It has built almost 11,500 new band D properties since 2010, yielding an extra £13.5 million a year in council tax. It is doing its best to grow the council tax base, but it is difficult.

Knowsley has made particular efforts to grow its local economy to deal with similar issues, and has managed to do so pretty well. However, it has to spend 80% of its resource on statutory services that it cannot avoid and adult social care, so there is not much space for it to make further savings. It can raise only £477,000 for each 1% increase in council tax. It is therefore fantasy for the Secretary of State and Government Members to argue that this is about efficiencies and just doing things a little bit better. It is far more fundamental than that.

When the Minister responds, I wonder if he might deal with the admitted errors that have been made in section 31 grant calculations in respect of authorities such as Knowsley. Apparently the council was told, after the legal deadline for setting its budget, that there was going to be clawback, because the Department had miscalculated the money due under section 31. To repay that money, Knowsley Council might have to raise council tax by an extra 2%. It cannot do so, however, as it has already set its budget. I hope the Minister will deal with the mistakes made by his Department. The effect on poorer councils such as Knowsley and Liverpool could be devastating. It is bad enough to lose 64% of

[*Maria Eagle*]

resource and bad enough to lose 45% of the money used to carry out statutory duties, but to then have further monies clawed back because of a mistake by the Government is completely unconscionable. I hope the Minister in his reply will at least be able to give me some assurances about that clawback and what the Department is going to do about it.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):** We will drop the limit to four minutes to try to give everyone equal time.

4.25 pm

**Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I welcome the funding settlement approved by this House last month, which will see my own local authority of South Gloucestershire given an additional £3.2 million in funding. This will have a number of positive consequences, based on the budget agreed a week after this funding was announced.

The school improvement fund will double, meaning that more help will be available to ensure our children get the most out of their education. I am most proud of the fact that the extra £3.2 million will allow the council to act to help care leavers, meaning that they have increased opportunity to meet their own potential. As well as receiving council tax relief, care leavers will benefit from a programme to encourage apprenticeships. I have spoken many times before about the power of apprenticeships to encourage social mobility. I am very proud to see the money being put to such good use, so our youngsters can fulfil their true potential.

The Conservative leaders of South Gloucestershire Council have ensured that the budget is balanced for this year. It is regrettable, however, that that balance was achieved with a 5.99% increase in council tax. The introduction of council tax referendums from 2012 was the expression of a key Conservative principle that taxation should be by consent, with a mandate and as low as possible. It is, however, no surprise that when the threshold for a referendum is a 6% increase, we see a number of councils raising tax by 5.99%. A cynical observer may suggest that they do not want the public scrutiny that would come with a debate and a referendum. The lesson of Northamptonshire County Council is that financial obligations cannot be dodged and that the political leadership of our councils cannot be abandoned.

**Sir Christopher Chope:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Jack Lopresti:** With pleasure.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. Just one second. We are not going to be able to get Members in. Members have had six minutes each and I have now dropped the limit to four minutes. We are in danger of being self-indulgent if we are not careful. Some people will not get in and that is unfair when this issue matters to every constituency.

**Sir Christopher Chope:** I withdraw my intervention.

**Jack Lopresti:** Apologies, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was just being polite.

South Gloucestershire Council managed to balance its budget, but if councils are struggling to balance their books and need more money, they should not be afraid to make that case to their residents and ask them to fund the services they need. That would require real political leadership and potentially expose some uncomfortable facts, but it would be the responsible course of action. I sincerely hope that, buoyed by the funding increase this year, South Gloucestershire Council takes this opportunity to look carefully at the governance of the council and how effectively it works.

**Sir Greg Knight** (East Yorkshire) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Jack Lopresti:** With pleasure. I am being polite again, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Sir Greg Knight:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. Does he agree that one thing councils should not do if they are trying to raise money is increase in-town and in-city parking charges? In her report, Mary Portas clearly identified that as a disincentive to the public to shop in our town centres.

**Jack Lopresti:** There has been a big debate in my own area about parking at the Mall at Cribbs Causeway, which remains free. It is always a tough balancing act. Decisions have to be made at a local level to match the circumstances of any particular local authority.

When it works well, an experienced team of senior officers can provide vital support and advice for a council, and they can be an invaluable resource for the elected leaders of councils. However, the dangers can be significant. Too many councils fall into the trap of being officer-led, rather than councillor-led. The leadership of South Gloucestershire Council needs to show political courage. For instance, I do wonder whether South Gloucestershire Council requires a chief executive who is paid more than the Prime Minister, at £158,885 per annum. Indeed, I find myself wondering whether South Gloucestershire Council needs a chief executive at all. As the Department for Communities and Local Government said in 2014:

“the traditional model of chief executive, with a wide public role and a significant salary, is unnecessary and can weaken the ability of a council’s political leadership to set a direction through elected members.”

We must also be alert to the dangers of councils with significant layers of highly paid senior officers putting a real burden on budgets for frontline services. South Gloucestershire Council should really be looking to make sensible savings, for example by sharing back-office costs wherever possible. As well as having a chief executive paid more than the Prime Minister, not to mention a deputy and supporting back-room staff, the council has 15 permanent heads of service. These are joined by one temporary head, four permanent directors, one deputy director, one temporary director and one managing director. Based on pay data published at the end of last year, that amounts to a minimum of £2 million per annum on just 23 senior officers.

This is the kind of scrutiny and debate that councils would face if they held referendums on sizeable council tax rises. They would have to justify officer pay and reduce it where appropriate, and elected councillors would have to regain their role as strategic leaders. Therefore, as much as I welcome the £3.2 million provided

to South Gloucestershire Council, I would also welcome any move towards councils having to publicly justify their rising costs through a referendum, trusting the verdict of the people.

4.30 pm

**Naz Shah** (Bradford West) (Lab): I feel like this is one of those debates where there may be less disagreement than usual, given the appalling cuts that almost all our councils have faced over the last seven years. Let us be clear that council budgets are at breaking point. There are very few places left to cut. We are talking about our councils struggling to stay financially viable. There is little to nothing known about their sustainability from 2020 onwards, and there is real fear in our communities as we begin to lose services that are essential to people's wellbeing. The truth is that the Government have put so much pressure on councils that statutory services have never been on a more insecure footing. They have put ever-increasing pressure on councils such as mine in Bradford and in other areas that sadly face the reality of deprivation.

In February in this Chamber, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government said that

"local government delivers vital services for the communities they serve—services that many of us take for granted, provided by dedicated, often unsung councillors and officers in places that we are all proud to call home. As such, as I have said before, local government is the frontline of our democracy and deserves the resources it needs to do its job,"

which is to

"deliver truly world-class services."—[*Official Report*, 7 February 2018; Vol. 635, c. 1561.]

So the question is: why do the Government treat our tremendous councils, councillors and officers with such contempt, expecting them to provide world-class services that people desperately need with crumbs from the table?

Bradford will have seen a near 30% reduction in its funding by 2020. It will have lost in real terms nearly £65 million from its budgets, and all the Government can do is tell it to manage and keep providing essential services. The difficulty—this has been true of many councils for a long time—is that there is no room left to cut. We are at breaking point, with councils having to lose frontline services at a rate of change that leaves some of the most vulnerable in our communities at risk. In Bradford alone, we face some of the most difficult decisions yet, and that is before we need to find another nearly £30 million in savings in the next year.

A local group, Bradford Families Against Children's Services Cuts, is fighting to try and save the special educational needs and disability and children's services provision in the city. These real families are directly affected by the cuts, but the council is in an impossible position: instead of the expected £15 million funding from central Government, it will receive only £7.5 million. Let me be clear: this is at the Government's door—they are deciding that these services are not worth protecting. The same is true for our early years children's services, where, because of the extreme savings required by the Government, we are likely to have to lose nearly 200 members of staff. This is the grim reality for councils up and down the country while they strive to provide the most important services with less and less money.

This is not sustainable, and as the National Audit Office report on the financial sustainability of local authorities highlighted in no uncertain terms, as pressures grow, there are real and immediate risks to statutory services. Sadly, the Government seem content to keep dividing people. The chair of Solace and chief executive of Doncaster council wrote in *The Guardian* that councils can take no

"more shocks to what is already a shocked system."

They are being thrown over a cliff edge, and Northamptonshire Council is one of those examples. The Government can wrap it up how they want, but the fact is that the situation is due to their cuts and their austerity policies. They really need to take stock and change those policies.

4.34 pm

**Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Like many hon. Members, I started out in politics by serving as a local councillor. I served four very enjoyable and informative years on Cornwall Council, including as part of the cabinet. There is no doubt in my mind about the importance of local government in delivering essential services to our communities, and they are some of the services that our residents care about the most. However, as with all parts of the public sector, it is vital that local government is held to account to ensure that it delivers value for money for the taxpayer.

In recent years, when we have been dealing with record deficits and have needed to bring the public sector finances back into balance, given the mess we inherited in 2010, it is right that local government has also had to cut back its spending. That has largely been a positive process for both councils and the taxpayer. Councils have had to make efficiencies, innovate and, where appropriate, work together to find the savings required. That has pushed councils into finding better and more efficient ways of working to deliver those services—ways that they might otherwise never have considered. It has also encouraged councils to focus on delivering the core services that residents really want their councils to deliver, rather than wasting money on what are often vanity projects.

However, even with the financial challenges that councils face, there are often still cases of councils wasting money and getting their priorities wrong. Just last week we learned that Liberal Democrat Cornwall Council spent over £46,000 on sending five officers to a property developers conference in Cannes. That is a huge sum of money, and it included £23,000 for renting an apartment for four days for those officers. For people in Cornwall, where the average salary is £17,000 a year, that is a huge amount of money.

That spending might have been questioned even when councils had plenty of money, but my office contacts Cornwall Council virtually every week to ask it on behalf of residents to re-paint some yellow lines, cut some grass or trim some hedges, and the answer we get time and again is, "We don't have any money to do that because of central Government cuts." It is funny that the council still manages to find money to do the things that it wants to do. It is therefore important that we continue to focus on councils to ensure they are getting their priorities right, delivering value for money and the things that the taxpayer wants their hard-earned tax pounds to be spent on.

[*Steve Double*]

I am sure that the Minister would be surprised if I did not use the time I have left to mention the underfunding that we have experienced in rural councils for far too long. I do not have time to go into all the figures—I know that he is familiar with them—but rural residents pay more in council tax, receive fewer services and on average earn less than those in urban areas. That inequality is unacceptable and has gone on too long. The Government need to deliver on the needs review to make sure we get the baseline right before it is hard-baked in, when 100% retention of business rates is introduced, so that rural councils get a fair deal and receive the funding they rightly deserve. They face increased pressure on their budgets—often far more than urban councils—particularly with the huge rise in social care costs that we are experiencing. I urge the Minister, ahead of the next settlement period for local councils, to get the review in place, reset local government funding and give rural councils a fairer deal.

4.38 pm

**Matt Rodda** (Reading East) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I would like to add my support to the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and many other Opposition Members. I would also like to steer the debate gently back to reality and away from the comments of the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), who somewhat contradicted himself by talking about the need for more spending and less spending at the same time.

As we have heard, grants from central Government to local councils have been cut by nearly 50% since 2010, and there has been a 28% real-terms reduction in local authorities' spending power. In my constituency, Government funding has been cut by nearly £58 million. In 2010, the council was relatively well supported by central Government, but after 2020 it is looking forward to a future with no central Government grant whatever. I am sure all Members are concerned about the fact that the Government have no long-term funding plan for local authorities. There is absolutely no clarity about how local government will be funded when the four-year deal runs out in March 2020, just two years from now.

Let me return to the impact of the cuts on my constituents in both Reading and Woodley. While Government funding has fallen, the cost of providing services has risen and continues to rise. Reading Borough Council has a strong track record of maintaining necessary services for residents. Unlike neighbouring Conservative-run West Berkshire council, it has kept all its libraries open. It has maintained award-winning parks and a council-owned theatre, as well as a wide range of the vital frontline services that ensure—as other Members have pointed out—that vulnerable children, adults and families are protected. However, like many councils throughout the country which have a statutory duty to provide adult and children's social care, Reading is forced to make cuts to other services just to balance the books.

A recent National Audit Office report on the sustainability of local authorities found that, nationally, the knock-on effect of such cuts is a reduction in spending on other hugely important services on which we all rely, such as planning and development, highways

and transport, and housing. Housing is a vital service in Reading, as it is in many other English towns. Local people rely on and expect councils to be able to provide a wide range of high-quality public services, including services for the elderly and for children, and care for vulnerable adults.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): I agree with everything that my hon. Friend has said so far. I am sure he has noticed the tone of today's debate. The Conservatives are blaming Labour local authorities while shifting on to them expenditure that central Government should be funding, and then telling us that we are spending too much money.

**Matt Rodda**: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. I am sure that the situation in Coventry is very similar to that in my own area.

I am proud of the achievements of my Labour-led council, which provides vital services for the people of Reading while under intense financial pressure, but the current funding situation is not sustainable in the medium or the long term. The Government have failed to stand up for local communities. They have forged ahead with their failed austerity agenda, and—as has been pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) and many other Members—have left councillors to make the most painful decisions about which vital services will be cut.

Sadly the Secretary of State is no longer present, but I say this to the Minister. Surely it is time for the Government to listen to local authorities—to listen, indeed, to some of their own local councillors—and to deliver the fair and adequate funding for local councils that we all know they deserve.

4.42 pm

**Mr Ranil Jayawardena** (North East Hampshire) (Con): Like many other Members, I have had real experience in local government. While I listened carefully to what was said by the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda), I am sorry that he was, from my perspective, the voice of doom and gloom. In my time in local government I saw many positives, and I think it important to take account of that in the context of funding.

Basingstoke and Deane, one of the local authorities that I represent, froze council tax year after year while I was cabinet member for finance and property and, latterly, deputy leader. We managed to do that by identifying efficiencies that we could make without hitting the services that we were providing. We delivered £9.7 million of year-on-year savings over seven years, amounting to 20% of the underlying gross budget. At the same time, 96% of residents said that they were happy with where they lived. Reducing cost does not have to equal reducing services, but Labour Members just do not get that.

Protecting taxpayers' money is critical. Putting people first means ensuring that their hard-earned money is spent well by local councils. It does depend on the scale of the council, but we achieved real innovation, and I think that councils should do much more of that in the years ahead. We invested in economic growth, delivering a Waitrose and John Lewis and a Costa Coffee on council land and putting money into shopping centres in our area. Even now, there is a plan to create 4,000 new jobs, adding £233 million of gross value to the economy per annum. That is good news. I am afraid that Labour

Members want to talk down local government and its achievements. *[Interruption.]* Any Member who wishes to intervene is more than welcome to do so.

Hart District Council, my other council, is much smaller. Decisions taken by the Conservatives when they were in control have meant that council tax has been kept low and services have been made more efficient. Outsourcing through a five councils initiative, with councils across the country, has meant that even though the revenue support grant has been declining—and I support the idea that councils should become more responsible for their income and expenditure—the council remains viable and prosperous and continues to deliver the services that people want. However, I raise one point with the Minister: the negative RSG being proposed is a different matter. I hope he will be able to reassure me on that point later.

The five councils initiative demonstrates that scale is important. The county council has been so successful because of its scale. It has analysed ways in which greater efficiencies can be made: savings to the tune of £791 million, according to a Deloitte report—almost a billion pounds could be saved through closer working across the county and the cities. I urge Ministers to work with Members here to identify sensible ways forward to deliver that closer working; perhaps combined authorities could be the first step towards that.

There are opportunities for further efficiency from devolution as services such as health and social care could be integrated more closely, delivering a better outcome for people while saving money for the taxpayer. That focus is what underpins my interest in this area. Better services and lower taxes—that is what the Conservatives are doing. We will put the people first. That is what we have done, and it is what we are going to get on and do.

4.46 pm

**Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): Many of us have first-hand experience of the responsibility on local authorities to provide services on a budget. The local authority of a Member who was, like me, elected to Parliament in 2010 will have less than half the Government grant now than it had then.

As councillors, we knew about the need for services such as adult social care for vulnerable people and services that families needed, such as children's centres. There is a need for the bins to be emptied, the roads swept, the pavements repaired, the libraries and leisure centres kept open, planning applications processed, local businesses supported, child protection services sustained and many other things that local residents take for granted.

People are now noticing the differences—potholes, grass verges, graffiti, fly-tipping, antisocial behaviour and many other things basic to everyday life come to mind. Ministers may rightly say that my Labour Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council is a good council. Several times in recent years it has been shortlisted for, and even won, the council of the year award. Our social workers are winning national awards. We are getting gold awards for animal welfare. Our high street won the "rising star" award. We won "client of the year" for our partnership and building projects. We are winning engineering awards, fostering and adoption campaign awards and awards for protecting the most vulnerable.

Those are all being achieved in the face of adversity—in the knowledge that the day is beckoning when either funding is provided or councillors in Stockton will be delivering the most basic of services, stripped to the statutory minimum and rationed. Stockton Council has done the right thing—focused on protecting the areas and people most in need—but that does not negate the growing pressure on children's and adults' social care services, which now take up 57% of the council's cash. It is no wonder. People are living longer and there is an increased dependency on services such as respite provision and community nursing. Demands for adult social care services are increasing, yet Stockton will see a £74 million a year cut by 2019-20 compared with 2010-11.

Given that local authorities have such a key role to play in people's day-to-day lives, it is even more absurd that our model of funding is so unstable that it changes frequently and is then topped up with enforced council tax increases and the Tory Government's social care precept. Do not try to kid me that the Tories are the party of low tax on hard-working families when they dump those central Government costs on council tax payers.

I am sure that what Stockton wants is reflected in many councils across the country. It wants a fair funding review that is just that—fair. I remember the £300 million of extra funding allocated by Government last year; the vast majority of it went to Tory southern authorities. It wants an end to the huge pressures in children's services and a full recognition of the evidence linking deprivation and the numbers of looked-after children. That must be acknowledged and built into any new model, to ensure that children are kept safe and can receive services and support.

Councils want certainty over future budgets. They want a dose of honesty from the Government, who have reneged on their responsibility to fund councils properly and passed the buck to local councillors, who have to raise council taxes higher and higher in order to maintain statutory services. Northern councils want recognition that most of their properties are in the low council tax bands, which limits their ability to raise substantial sums through small increases. We do not have developers building blocks of 200 apartments costing £500,000 or even more, which can raise hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of pounds for the likes of Westminster and Wandsworth. This is not just a case of the north whingeing. The National Audit Office has confirmed the perilous position in which most councils find themselves, which could mean unsustainability for many of them. After eight years in power, the Conservatives must take some responsibility—in fact, all the responsibility—for this. They must realise the impact of their decisions. They are culpable for the funding crisis in most of our local authorities: it is no one else's fault.

4.50 pm

**Paul Scully** (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): My old sales manager used to say that when you point the finger at someone, you get three fingers pointing back at you. We have just heard that all this is apparently the Government's fault, but we know what the Government are actually doing through the Localism Act 2011. It was this Government who introduced the Act, under which they trust councillors and make them accountable for the services they provide at the lowest possible layer, closest to the residents that they serve.

[Paul Scully]

This settlement is clearly a crucial issue for local authorities. As has been said, councils of all colours have been talking about the squeeze on local finances, and we have to look at that. It is important that the settlement should strike the right balance between relieving pressure on local services, including social care, and the ongoing need to service our debt, while recognising that families face their own pressures. The Government recognise the fact that we need to move to a formula that allows for fairer funding and tackles the issue of negative revenue support grants.

I said in an intervention that local choice is absolutely massive. If we are going to trust councillors to deliver local services, we have to let them be responsive to their electorate and also accountable to them. Hazelbourne Road is in south London. Anyone who lives on the Wandsworth side of the road will spend 664 quid less on their council tax than someone who lives just opposite on the Lambeth side. There is a stark difference in the way in which different councils are responding to this backdrop. Let us look at the council taxes that were announced yesterday. Conservative-controlled councils in London charge an average of £148 less than Labour-controlled councils on a band D home. Labour councils have hiked up their bills the most. In 2018-19, Labour councils in London imposed on average an inflation-busting 4.3% on bills, compared with 2.7% for Conservative councils. Residents can see that stark difference, and they understand that it is their council that is taking that decision.

Let us take Kingston Council as an example. Unless something changes drastically over the next few weeks, that council will not get any Government funding from this coming year. Despite that, however, it has been able to freeze its council tax. It has also been able to offer 30 minutes' free parking, and it has opened two new schools with another one coming along. It has also bought 12 police officers, to make its borough even safer, in response to its residents. Barnet Council has frozen its council tax for seven years, but it still has weekly bin collections and it has invested £7 million in technology to keep its libraries open.

Hillingdon has frozen its council tax for 10 years, but despite that, the shadow Chancellor can enjoy the fact that his libraries have been refurbished, unlike next door in Labour-run Harrow, where Hatch End library is under threat of closure. Hillingdon Council has invested £10 million in its roads and footpaths, as well as exceeding its new housing target. Then I look at my own area of Sutton, where the bin collection has developed its own national hashtag—#suttonbinshame—and the council has sold off a heritage building for £600,000, even though the charity that bought it has managed to take out a £2.5 million mortgage on it. These are local choices, and residents do not need to settle for second best.

4.54 pm

**Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I was elected to Southwark Council in 2010—just as the Tory-Lib Dem coalition Government came to power—and I served on the council until May 2016. We knew in 2010 that David Cameron and George Osborne's response to the impact of the global financial crash would shrink

the size of government at the expense of vulnerable people and that things were not going to be easy. We knew that funding was going to be cut and that there would be difficult decisions to make as a consequence. However, we could not have anticipated just how much the burden of Lib Dem-Tory austerity would be made to fall on local councils.

Both the councils that serve my constituency—Lambeth and Southwark—have lost more than 50% of their grant from central Government. Lambeth alone has had to make savings of more than £200 million. In that context, both Labour councils have been striving to continue to protect local services, to continue to deliver for local residents and to act as a shield between their local communities and the Government's austerity programme.

Lambeth has protected funding for specialist women's refuge services, which is in contrast with other parts of the country, where 17% of specialist refuges have closed since 2010. Lambeth has maintained a commitment to some of the most vulnerable women in our community. Such services are largely invisible to all but those who rely on them, and I am extremely proud of Lambeth's commitment.

Southwark has sustained a commitment made in 2010—in the face of vociferous opposition from local Lib Dems and Tories—to fund universal free school meals for primary-age children. Unlike this Government and their partial, miserly approach to free school meals, Southwark has recognised the benefits that come in attainment and social development from ensuring that every child in the borough has at least one healthy hot meal a day, that children from diverse backgrounds eat together, and that no child is stigmatised because of poverty.

Both councils were among the earliest adopters of Unison's ethical care charter for social care, which is a commitment to pay all care workers the London living wage and to ensure that they are paid for travel between appointments, have sufficient time to care and are well trained. That is a commitment to fairness and to doing the right thing by the borough's most vulnerable residents despite, not because of, the Government's approach.

I am proud of those commitments and of the thoughtfulness and hard work of both councillors and council staff that has gone into delivering them. Lambeth and Southwark have shown remarkable resilience and commitment, but both are under intolerable pressure—pressure also experienced by councils across the country—and Government Members who doubt the severity of the crisis must listen to the words of their Conservative council colleagues. Sir Paul Carter, the Conservative leader of Kent County Council recently told the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee:

“Local government and county councils, which have had the steepest financial challenge of any part of local government, have done extraordinarily well to help national Government start to restore the country's public finances. We are all finding now that we really are eating into the bone”.

He went on to say that

“there are so many unfunded pressures that are building up across the piece in local government...The elastic is fully stretched.”

The Conservative chair of the LGA, Lord Porter, commenting on the Government's decision to allow councils to raise council tax, said:

“The extra income this year will help offset some of the financial pressures they face but the reality is that many councils are now beyond the point where council tax income can be expected to plug the growing funding gaps they face.”

Those are the words, not of the Government’s political opponents, but of its friends in local government—councillors who have campaigned to get Conservative MPs elected—who clearly agree that the Government have quite simply been weaponising local councils to mete out the misery of its austerity agenda.

As I pay tribute to my Labour councils for their commitment to shielding our local communities from austerity as best they can in impossible circumstances, I call on the Government to recognise the vital role that local government plays, to heed the warnings from their own council colleagues, and to adopt an approach that seeks to empower local authorities, who know their communities best, to take decisions in the interests of the residents they serve.

4.58 pm

**Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate, but is it not ironic that the very Members who called for this debate are those who voted against a real-terms increase for local councils in the local government funding settlement?

Let us look at some of the multitude of reasons why councils have tough funding decisions to make. East Sussex County Council, which covers my constituency, is a rural authority, and rural authorities have been significantly underfunded for decades compared with urban areas, something which was never addressed by the previous Labour Government. Rural authorities such as East Sussex receive 45% less funding per head of population. They get 41% less police grant and 32.4% less fire authority grant than urban areas. That is something that was never tackled under Labour but which this Government are looking at.

On need, East Sussex has the highest number of 85-year-olds in the country, and that puts pressure on our adult social care. The House should not be misled by southern areas being comparatively rich. I have some of the most deprived coastal regions in the country, with people earning 85% less than those in urban areas. There is real deprivation and real need in those areas, and the Government have come up with a solution. There will be an increase in the rural services delivery grant in 2018-19, meaning an overall increase of £81 million. That is the highest ever increase, delivered by a Conservative Government. The fair funding review is long overdue, and Labour Members should ask themselves why they did not do it when they were in government.

It is not just about the money that is being given; it is about the use of the funds that are available. When I talk to my constituents, they say that they want their local councils to deliver social services, to collect the bins, to build more housing, to fix the potholes and to get the schools into good and outstanding ratings, but let us look at what some Labour councils are delivering.

Bradford City Council recently spent £1.2 million on a swimming pool strategy that was ditched at the last minute, and it spent £15,000 on a new statue for the town centre. When Northumberland County Council

was under Labour administration, it gave £1 million via its property development arm to Ashington football club, which was unearthed only when the Tories took over control last year.

We need to hold councils to account for the money that they spend, but it is not just money spent on pet projects that is often wasted. Figures revealed by the TaxPayers Alliance show that 539 senior council executives across the country earn more than the Prime Minister, and 2,314 senior council executives are on more than £100,000 a year—an 11% increase. Of the 10 councils that pay their executives the most, 70% are Labour controlled. Those councils are paying between £350,000 and £650,000 a year per post, which tells us where the money is being spent.

I welcome the increase in local government funding, but let us look at the record of Opposition Members. They voted against 60,000 young first-time buyers being exempted from stamp duty. Last week, they voted against 50,000 young children getting access to free school meals and, once again, we have seen them vote against councils getting more funding. Their actions speak louder than their words.

5.2 pm

**Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): Despite already achieving savings of £94 million, Bedford Borough Council must find further savings of £23.5 million by 2021. The council has protected frontline services as far as possible, and in doing so has shielded the majority of the public from the depth of the cuts it has experienced. The public think their council tax just pays for the council, but it also pays for the fire service, the police and town councils.

Local authorities face a range of new demands and cost pressures, but their statutory obligations have not been reduced. The revenue support grant from central Government to Bedford Borough Council has fallen by 90% since 2010, and demand for local council services, especially social care, is rocketing. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 will increase pressure on the council, but the council will not be given sufficient money to administer the Act in the long term.

Bedford Borough Council received just over £30 million of revenue support grant from central Government in 2015, which will fall to £5.8 million by 2019-20—the grant is falling by £6.8 million this year alone. It is one thing to make efficiency savings and quite another not to give councils the money they need to cover statutory services. The public pay their income tax and council tax, and they rightly expect a decent service in return.

It is totally unfair that the only way councils can now plug the funding gap caused by central Government is to raise council tax contributions. The Government are passing their responsibility on to the taxpayer, but why should the public pay more for a reduced service? I only hope they know to point the finger for the decline they see around them at central not local government. The decimation of public services and the destruction of local government is damaging communities, and it is time the Government put an end to all the uncertainty surrounding public services funding and realise that the cuts they are making to local services are really hurting the people they are elected to protect and represent.

5.5 pm

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I start by paying tribute and giving great thanks to the councillors and officers at East Sussex County Council, Wealden District Council and Rother District Council, who represent my constituents so ably. They have had a challenging few years, but they have tackled that challenge with aplomb and I want to pay respect to them in this House.

I listened to what the shadow Secretary of State had to say. I am not sure which orifice he was speaking through, but there was certainly plenty of bare cheek on display this afternoon, because to talk about the challenges faced over the past eight years without showing any form of culpable sympathy to those councils for the role played by his predecessors in government up to 2010 was extraordinary. That type of demonstration ensures that the Labour party stays on the Opposition Benches, as it has done over the past three elections.

However, I want to talk to our local government Minister; the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) is one of the finest minds of my intake and also one of the nicest. I want to talk about the challenges faced in East Sussex, a county of just over 500,000 people. It has a challenging demographic. We are delighted to welcome so many people who retire to the county, but as one of the leaders of my local district council put it, "When people retire to the constituency, they tend to have to take out more than they are able to contribute." That is what happens to us. In my constituency, 28% of my constituents are over 65, whereas the national average is only 17%. That will show the Minister the challenges we face. So I welcome the commitment to fair funding. I hope that each county will be looked at to see its demographic and the challenges it faces, particularly rural counties that have a higher than average retired population, in order to ensure that we are funded appropriately.

In addition, we need investment. We need more houses for people to live in and work from, so that we balance our economy. Although East Sussex has had great success, with an increase of 5% in its economy over the past few years, we still have a long way to go. That is why we are asking the Government to commit to give funding to improve the A27, on which a campaign is being led by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield); the A21, where my colleague and neighbour on the other side, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), is involved, as the road badly needs investment; and high-speed rail. If we had the right transport in our area, we would be able to grow our economy on our own and not be constantly asking the Government for more.

I come back to the retirement age in my constituency, because the crucial issue for us pertains to social care. While it remains a locally funded service, it causes great pressure for council tax payers in areas where social care is most used. I would like the Government either to fund social care at the national level, as the NHS is funded, or to look again at increased funding for social care for areas to which more people tend to retire. If we do not do that, the situation will become unsustainable. I have seen the figures from my county council on where council tax or business rates would have to go to without reform and it is not a pretty place at all.

I want to end, as I started, by saying thank you to all the amazing district and county councillors and officers, who do such a great job to look after us in East Sussex, but I would also like the Government to do more and help them in their quest.

5.9 pm

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on a critical issue for the future of the UK and, indeed, the integrity of many of our communities that have faced hardship in recent years.

I wish to pay particular attention to the issues that affect my constituency, which come under the Scottish Government's purview. It was interesting to hear the Scottish National party Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), grandstanding and railing against the cuts that are coming to Scotland, and talking about how the SNP has been stretching every sinew to mitigate Tory cuts. Indeed, he referred to the block grant cut, yet why did SNP Members abstain on Third Reading of the Tory Finance Bill just a few weeks ago? They could have prevented that cut. It is clear that in reality they are not doing much to mitigate the cuts.

Local government in Scotland is now the most centralised system of government of any country in Europe. We have seen a continued strangulation of local government finances. The SNP has slashed £1.5 billion from local councils since 2011, merely acting as a conveyor belt for Tory austerity.

**Drew Hendry:** Does the hon. Gentleman agree with not only the Scottish Government but the Fraser of Allander Institute that Scotland's discretionary budget has been cut by more than 5% over the past few years?

**Mr Sweeney:** The reality facing local government in Scotland is that the SNP has taken Tory austerity and more than doubled it, passing it on to local government. From 2013-14 to 2016-17, the local government revenue budget decreased at a much faster rate—minus 4.6%—than the Scottish Government's revenue budget, which declined by only 1.5%. If we look at the local government finance order figures for 2016-17 to 2017-18, we see that the revenue budget for local government continues to fall, by 2.2%, while the Scottish Government revenue budget falls by only 0.6%. That is a conveyor belt and amplification of Tory cuts; it is certainly not mitigating Tory cuts in Scotland. That is very much clear from the SNP's attitude.

The SNP budget was passed on 21 February, with the support of the Scottish Green party. The budget deal struck by the SNP and Greens does not stop Tory austerity, tackle poverty or redistribute wealth and power. For the second year running, Green Members of the Scottish Parliament have backed a nationalist budget, which will leave councils' lifeline services further squeezed. It is a backroom stitch-up deal that fails to fund a proper pay rise for council staff or to deal with the child poverty that our councils face. As I have mentioned before, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities said that it needed £545 million just to stand still, but the latest budget deal delivers only £159 million. I do not see much mitigation of local government cuts in that settlement.

Faced with a different path from that of the Tories' austerity, the SNP has ignored it and rejected the progressive, radical package brought forward by the Labour party in Scotland. Audit Scotland has confirmed that in November last year accounts revealed that there is increasing strain on local government finances throughout Scotland. In 2016-17, a total of 19 out of the 32 councils in Scotland used cash from their revenue reserves—up from just eight that did it in 2015-16. This dipping into reserves is really going through the fat and into the bone. It is totally unacceptable. Indeed, over the course of the year, the overall amount held in council rainy day funds, or reserves, fell by £32 million. The Accounts Commission said:

“Councils are showing signs of increasing financial stress. They are finding it increasingly difficult to identify and deliver savings and more have drawn on reserves than in previous years to fund change programmes and routine service delivery.”

That is extremely worrying.

Labour's alternative plan for the Scottish budget would deliver a nearly £1 billion stimulus for the Scottish economy, by saving lifeline local services; increasing child benefit by £5 a week to put money back into the pockets of working-class families; and delivering an extra £100 million for our NHS. We also have a more radical tax policy than the one the SNP has proposed, despite the Scottish Government's having unprecedented tax powers. The top 1% in Scotland own more wealth than the bottom 50% put together, but the SNP's proposals on income tax just tinker around the edges, putting a penny on the top rate. Labour's radical alternative would match the SNP's starter rate, but would drop the threshold for the 45p rate to those earning more than £60,000 and introduce a new 50p rate for those earning more than £100,000.

Prospects would improve massively under Labour's proposals. The SNP says that it cannot mitigate, but we have seen no effort to remove the public sector pay cap for local government. Public sector workers have faced years of cuts to their wages thanks to the pay cap. The current SNP proposals do not fully fund a pay rise and do not include all public sector workers—including those in local government. Labour's proposals would. It is a radical package of proposals from the Labour party in Scotland. In addition to our tax plans, the further investment could be used to deliver more radical decisions on income tax and new economic powers to local authorities, including the ability to levy a tourist tax and a land value tax on vacant and economically inactive land. The latter is critical to my constituents, where 10% of land is vacant and derelict. Those are radical proposals from a radical Scottish Labour Government-in-waiting.

5.14 pm

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Like many colleagues, I will concentrate my speech on the effects of the cuts on my local council in Leeds. I must declare an interest: I am still a city councillor until 3 May.

I pay tribute to the imagination and innovation of our Labour administration and to our great set of council officers who have brought forward many new and radical ways of working despite the difficult circumstances. None the less, the depth of the cuts means that many services are at breaking point. The

people of Leeds have borne the burden of maintaining services, which should be paid for from the local government grant. Leeds is a proud and compassionate city with a robust economy. I am incredibly proud of the council's approach, which, in the words of our city leader, Judith Blake, is to

“put the needs of our most vulnerable residents first, to improve our communities and bring people together in a peaceful and cohesive society and to boost the life chances of our young people by giving them the best opportunities we possibly can.”

By 2020, Leeds City Council will have seen its grant cut, year on year, by £267 million, and the budgetary pressures are not just restricted to revenue budgets either. The city faces a gap in Government funding for capital school projects of approximately £71.7 million. To make matters worse, the Government leave it to the market of free schools and academies to choose where to build new schools. The city has responsibility for placing children in schools, but does not know where those schools will be placed.

I wish to move on to the legion achievements of Leeds City Council since its return to Labour control in 2010. The adoption of a civic enterprise approach paid dividends in the early years of the austerity Budgets, and brought with it the insourcing of housing and housing maintenance, school meals, fleet services, cleaning, catering and plant nurseries. The council also created *Aspire*, a staff-owned, not-for-profit social enterprise, which provides care and support services to people with learning disabilities; it is the largest co-operative in Leeds.

The council, under the most difficult of circumstances, has delivered new social housing, with a £108 million council house growth programme, which aims to deliver 1,000 new homes by 2020. Personally, I am delighted that the right-to-buy programme and the use of £3 million of prudential borrowing has meant that our great homeless charity, *St George's Crypt*, is developing 45 affordable supported living units for people who are homeless or in housing need.

The Labour administration has had to make some hard political choices, but Leeds is the only local authority in England to keep all its children's centres open. These are invaluable facilities, which helped my own children in their early years. The council has also removed charges for burials and cremations for children under 16. It is compassionate indeed. Leeds has by far the lowest funding for special educational needs of all core cities, with £378 per head against a core city average of £472. I call on the Minister to revisit that gross injustice.

I wish to concentrate my final remarks on the city's work on climate change. As the deputy executive member for climate change and sustainability, I proudly played a part in the city's work until my election to this place. Before the historic Conference of Parties 21, Leeds was the first authority to commit to 100% clean energy by 2050. The city has begun many projects to achieve that ambitious environmental goal. In my first few months in office, we installed more than 1,000 solar roofs on council homes and buildings, but we could not continue the programme owing to the Government's cut in the feed-in tariff for solar. The council has had an extensive programme of replacing diesel with electric vehicles and now has a fleet of more than 70 electric vehicles.

The city is installing a district heat and power network after securing nearly £6 million in European funding. The network will heat 22,000 homes, including high-rise

[Alex Sobel]

blocks, which are in fuel poverty. The city's plans on clean air are ambitious, unlike those of the Government who have been dragged kicking and screaming through the courts four times by ClientEarth. Leeds has grasped the nettle and is the first city to go to consultation on a zone to cover all roads in the outer ring road, which is a very large clean air zone, and its proposals are already affecting behaviour, with First Bus investing in cleaner Euro 6 diesel vehicles.

The council needs to achieve much more on air quality, and cannot do so without Government support. I am still waiting for a real commitment from the Government to support us in Leeds. Leeds has done everything asked of it—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. I call Jim McMahon.

5.18 pm

**Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op):** I thank all Members who have participated in this debate. It is fair to say that local government finance is not always the thing that enthuses people, but what we have learned today is that finance is there for a purpose: to deliver essential public services—or, in the words of the Secretary of State, “vital services on which we all depend.” To be fair though, that is probably where the Secretary of State's understanding ends. He gets the principle, but not the true impact of austerity.

The best preparation for this debate would have been completely wasted because it would have missed the gift that keeps on giving, which is that the Secretary of State's testbed for local government seems to be the sinking of the Titanic—a vessel that went out 106 years ago not fit for the journey ahead, without enough life rafts for the people on it and completely misunderstanding that there was an iceberg ahead and the damage that it would cause. Now, Northamptonshire might be the tip of the iceberg in local government terms, but the truth is that many councils are really struggling beneath the surface.

We have heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), for Bradford West (Naz Shah), for Reading East (Matt Rodda), for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin), for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) and for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). The thing that ran through all those contributions was the human and community cost of taking money from public services. We hear that 64% of the Government grant has been taken away in Liverpool. That is not just a number on a balance sheet. It was money for essential services that existed to support a community that needed support to grow, develop and prosper. But that rug has been completely pulled from under the people of Liverpool.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East that local councils have very little clarity about what is heading towards them beyond 2020. It is true that many came forward as part of the multi-year settlement, but it is also true that the fair funding settlement is sending shivers down the spine of many local councils because they know exactly what it means. We saw it with the deletion of the area-based grant in 2010, when money directed at areas of high deprivation

was completely taken away. Over recent years, the introduction of the transition grant and the rural services delivery grant have targeted mainly Tory shires. We know what fair funding really means to the Government.

**Maria Caulfield:** I have to disagree. As I said in my speech, rural areas have had 45% less funding per head of population for decades. The rural services delivery grant goes some way, although not all the way, to redressing that balance.

**Jim McMahon:** Well, actually, it does not. I will give the hon. Lady an example. If a county area that had a strong council tax base was given £1 in central Government funding and 90p of that £1 was taken away, the area was treated favourably in the transition grant and the rural services delivery grant. If a metropolitan area had £100 and £50 was taken away, far more money that was delivering public services in that area has been taken away—£50 versus the 90p taken from the rural area—because the starting point is very different.

We cannot compare an area with a strong council tax base of high-value properties due to the way in which that area has developed historically—nothing to do with the local authority—with a post-industrial town where the council tax base is predicated on low house values. In my area, 87% of properties are in band A and band B, so there is a very low starting point. That is why far more is needed in council tax from those areas to generate the same amount of money.

**Maria Caulfield:** The hon. Gentleman is being extremely generous in giving way. Perhaps he should come to see the areas of deprivation in Newhaven in my constituency. There are no high-cost properties there. Perhaps he needs to look at rural areas in the round.

**Jim McMahon:** This ought not to be a fight between areas of high deprivation in our urban core and recognising that some services cost more to deliver in rural areas. Labour is calling for a genuinely fair funding settlement that would take into account deprivation, differential service delivery costs and the very particular circumstances of our coastal communities, which feel very much left behind. But we have no faith at all that that is where the Government are going. The Government are trying to redistribute a diminishing resource; we are seeing the redistribution of poverty under this Tory Government. The money just does not exist to fund public services where the demand is growing, which is in adult social care and children's safeguarding.

We heard earlier that Basingstoke and Deane is a paradise of local government where residents have seen no impact of cuts whatever. That is unless, of course, they remember the 46% reduction of net expenditure on pest control, the 45% reduction on environmental protection, the 33% reduction on food safety, the 66% reduction on recreation and sport, the 27% reduction on open spaces or the 17% reduction on street cleaning.

**Mr Jayawardena:** The hon. Gentleman clearly loves my former council very much. Would he agree, then, that actually only 6% of the budget comes from council tax, while the rest comes through well-managed finances and excellent use of our resources? We have created thousands of jobs whereas his party in that council has backed the wrong policies, turned down the economy and chosen to back vested interests in the unions.

**Jim McMahon:** It is true that this district council has increased spending in some areas, but unfortunately that is because of homelessness. One of the few budget lines that has increased is homelessness spending, which has gone up by 21%. As a result, the neighbourhood services that most people in the community would believe they pay council tax for have seen huge reductions. That council, which has no responsibility for adult social care or children's services because those are delivered by the county council, has had to take money away from neighbourhood services. Yet this is meant to be the council that we hold up as a paradise of public services under the new settlement.

**Mr Jayawardena:** I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman understands the difference between a county council, a district council and a county area. Would he then welcome the fact that Hampshire is now getting more money as its core spending power than it had in the past? Will he reflect on why the Labour party voted against that?

**Jim McMahon:** Most people who understand local government finance recognise that the budget lines in total net expenditure include huge sums of money that the local authority has almost no control over in its everyday spend. For instance, education services are included in controllable spend, but the local authority has no freedom or flexibility at all to direct where that money goes. Since the disbanding of primary care trusts, the public health transferred spend has been included as part of core spending power for local government, but there are new pressures and responsibilities that councils are expected to deliver on. The Government have tried to offset cuts to basic neighbourhood services and the lack of funding in children's services and adult social care through the smoke and mirrors in their calculations.

Let us see what this means in practice. Across England, since 2010, there has been a 54% cash reduction—not even a real-terms reduction—in spend on support for public transport routes. These are the neighbourhood services that our communities rely on. Tory MPs who will not support this Opposition day motion should think about the community bus services in rural areas that have been cut because the money simply is not in the system to provide those routes. Recreation and sport, essential for a healthy and thriving population, have had a 44% cash reduction; open spaces have had a 23% reduction; and trading standards, which provide essential community security, have had a 34% reduction.

In the last reshuffle, the Tories were like rats fleeing the sinking ship, but who would guess that rats are being protected because pest control has been cut by 49%? Only rats are safe under a Tory Government, it seems—that is, if they are not in one of the areas that has had to hike up the charges. In areas of deprivation, low-income families who cannot afford to pay the charges to keep away vermin are absolutely excluded from living in a safe and clean environment.

**Mr Jayawardena** *rose*—

**Jim McMahon:** I give way to the hon. Gentleman; he is very keen.

**Mr Jayawardena:** The hon. Gentleman is very generous. I have two points. First, pest control still supports those on income support who need help, and indeed some of the older people in our community. Secondly, does he welcome the fact that Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council spends over £600,000 on community transport and public transport schemes?

**Jim McMahon:** What I know is that in Greater Manchester we have lost 1.2 million miles of public transport routes because of central Government cuts to vital subsidised routes. That is the real impact. There is not a single Conservative Member, whatever they say, who can put their hand on their heart and say that the cuts have had no consequences for community life in their areas, because they absolutely have.

Earlier today, we had a debate on the review of the Manchester arena attack. For those of us who were affected by that within our communities, it was a very difficult moment. I ask the Government what assessment has been made of cuts to emergency planning budgets, because £21 million has been taken from those budgets since 2010—a 36% reduction.

Later, we will have a debate on the money that has been taken from our frontline policing. Councils also provide essential infrastructure to make sure that people can live in decent, safe and thriving communities. We have seen a 40% reduction in crime reduction spend by local authorities and a 66% reduction in community safety services—that is the people who go round parks and cemeteries to make sure they are safe and the CCTV operators who can capture evidence and hold criminals to account. That is where the money is being taken from. When we have the policing debate, we will hear about the absolute frontline impact of the cuts, but we also need to think about the council services that have been snatched away through austerity, because that has been the real impact.

**Mr Jayawardena:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Jim McMahon:** I cannot give way again. I will happily share a drink with the hon. Gentleman in the bar later and compare Basingstoke and Deane with Oldham, but that is as far as we need to go today.

If the Tory Government are determined to see Britain through Brexit, it has to be based on strong foundations. Essential to that are strong, high-performing public services. In many of our areas, not only have our economies been left behind but our public services have been completely fragmented and fractured as a result of Tory austerity.

What we say today is: enough is enough. Local government has taken the brunt of austerity, but it cannot carry on. We know the deficit, which has been identified by the LGA and the National Audit Office. All we ask for is that we see from this Secretary of State the same energy that the Defence Secretary showed when he went out and publicly demanded money for his Department and that the Health Secretary showed when he demanded money for the NHS.

5.31 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak):** May I start by echoing the sentiments of the Secretary of State and hon. Members on both sides of the House?

[*Rishi Sunak*]

Within the short space of time that I have served as Local Government Minister, I have seen countless examples of the lengths to which councils go to serve their communities. It is a privilege to represent them in the Government, and I commend the hard-working staff and councillors delivering the services on which our communities depend.

I am proud that this Government are listening to those councils, recognising the pressures they face and responding to their concerns. That is why local government is seeing a real-terms increase in financial resources over the next two years. That is why local government is benefiting from an extra £2 billion in social care funding, and that is why local government is keeping billions more of its own money through business rates retention.

**Maria Eagle:** The Minister has just asserted that local government will have a real-terms increase. Does he accept that, as the National Audit Office has said, a 49.1% real-terms reduction in that funding has occurred in the past seven or eight years since the Conservative party has been in power?

**Rishi Sunak:** As the National Audit Office pointed out, this Government were alert to the requirements of adult social care building as a pressure. This Government responded by delivering extra money for adult social care.

In general, what this Government are doing is working. In adult social care, we have seen delayed transfers of care fall by 34% in the past year. In housing, we are seeing record levels of new home building and infrastructure investment, and from Teesside to the west country, we are seeing areas seize the opportunity to shape their own future. My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) was absolutely right when he said that other people may paint a gloomy, downbeat picture, but there are examples of councils delivering for their constituents across the country, and as he pointed out, Kingston is doing a fantastic job.

Indeed, according to the LGA, over 80% of people are satisfied with their local area as a place to live, and satisfaction with local council services has remained entirely stable. To ensure that that continues, it is right that we update and modernise our current funding formulas. In the short term, I want to reassure the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) that the Government are not clawing back section 31 grants, as she suggested might be the case. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State confirmed that last week.

My hon. Friends the Members for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) and for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) rightly asked about negative RSG. The Government are aware of the strength of feeling on that issue. We are planning to look at fair and affordable options for addressing that problem and will consult on it shortly after the local elections.

My hon. Friends the Members for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) and for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) spoke passionately about the rural areas they represent. They highlighted the historical unfairness in funding that their councils have suffered and why they think that should be addressed. I can confirm to them that understanding the particular costs of delivering services

in rural areas and analysing the relative resources they have will absolutely be considered as part of our fair funding review.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) spoke about the importance of getting population growth right. Areas such as his have seen increases in the number of those of a particular age, which puts costs on to certain service areas. He is right to highlight that the new funding formula should use up-to-date population information and that it should be dynamic and respond to what is happening on the ground.

We have heard about children's services, and it is absolutely right that we focus attention on vulnerable young people who are denied the stability that many of us sitting in the Chamber have enjoyed. It is a privilege for me to be the Minister responsible for the troubled families programme. Delivered in partnership with local authorities, the programme will invest £1 billion to help the most vulnerable in our society. I spent a morning last week in Liverpool hearing at first hand from the families themselves about the difference that this programme is making to their lives. Conservatives like to measure success by the outcomes we achieve, not just the amount of other people's money that we spend, and the results are hugely encouraging.

**Alex Cunningham:** Does the Minister recognise the very specific link between deprivation and the number of children taken into care by our local authorities, and what is he going to do about it?

**Rishi Sunak:** What the Government are already doing about exactly that is working with the Department for Education on the most thorough and extensive piece of work ever undertaken to understand precisely the drivers of the need for children's services, which of course includes deprivation. The report will conclude later this year or early next year, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman is looking forward to reading the results.

Beyond that, the troubled families programme is driving innovation on the ground, changing the way that local authorities work and bringing previously disparate providers of care together to help those who need it most. Other people may like to talk of compassion, but we in the Government are delivering it.

We have heard a lot about spending, but curiously rather less from the Labour party about who is paying for it all. We in the Government know who ends up footing the bill—ordinary hard-working tax payers. Over the past few months, the Labour party's plans have become abundantly clear. We have heard about a radical change to council tax, a new local income tax, the abolition of the referendum tax limit and, as if that was not enough, a garden tax. Under the previous Labour Government, council tax doubled, and we all know that history tends to repeat itself. I can tell the House that this Government will always be on the side of hard-working tax payers. My hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) was absolutely right to say that we should be getting them value for money and keeping their bills low.

**Maria Caulfield:** Will my hon. Friend confirm that, under the Labour party's garden tax plan, 10 million families would have to find £4,000 a year more?

**Rishi Sunak:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the thousands of pounds that will be loaded on to the bills of ordinary working families. [*Interruption.*] Labour Members do not like it, but it is true.

We now know that council tax is lower in real terms than when we came into office, service delivery is high and innovation is thriving. This Conservative Government are strengthening our communities, and Conservative councils are keeping their taxes low. To conclude, it could not be clearer what happens when people vote Conservative—local government costs them less and delivers them more.

*Question put.*

*The House divided:* Ayes 238, Noes 0.

### Division No. 134]

[5.39 pm

#### AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane  
 Alexander, Heidi  
 Ali, Rushanara  
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena  
 Amesbury, Mike  
 Antoniazzi, Tonia  
 Ashworth, Jonathan  
 Austin, Ian  
 Bailey, Mr Adrian  
 Barron, rh Sir Kevin  
 Beckett, rh Margaret  
 Benn, rh Hilary  
 Berger, Luciana  
 Blackman-Woods, Dr  
 Roberta  
 Blomfield, Paul  
 Brabin, Tracy  
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben  
 Brake, rh Tom  
 Brennan, Kevin  
 Brown, Lyn  
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  
 Bryant, Chris  
 Buck, Ms Karen  
 Burden, Richard  
 Burgon, Richard  
 Butler, Dawn  
 Byrne, rh Liam  
 Cadbury, Ruth  
 Campbell, rh Mr Alan  
 Carden, Dan  
 Carmichael, rh Mr  
 Alistair  
 Champion, Sarah  
 Charalambous, Bambos  
 Coffey, Ann  
 Cooper, Julie  
 Cooper, Rosie  
 Cooper, rh Yvette  
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy  
 Coyle, Neil  
 Crausby, Sir David  
 Creagh, Mary  
 Creasy, Stella  
 Cruddas, Jon  
 Cryer, John  
 Cummins, Judith  
 Cunningham, Alex  
 Cunningham, Mr Jim  
 Dakin, Nic  
 Davey, rh Sir Edward  
 David, Wayne  
 De Cordova, Marsha  
 De Piero, Gloria  
 Dent Coad, Emma  
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet  
 Singh  
 Dodds, Anneliese  
 Dowd, Peter  
 Drew, Dr David  
 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  
 Fovargue, Yvonne  
 Foxcroft, Vicky  
 Frith, James  
 Furniss, Gill  
 Gaffney, Hugh  
 George, Ruth  
 Gill, Preet Kaur  
 Glindon, Mary  
 Godsiff, Mr Roger  
 Goodman, Helen  
 Green, Kate  
 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  
 Healey, rh John  
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen  
 Hill, Mike  
 Hillier, Meg  
 Hobhouse, Wera  
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret  
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon

Hopkins, Kelvin  
 Howarth, rh Mr George  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Jardine, Christine  
 Jarvis, Dan  
 Johnson, Diana  
 Jones, Darren  
 Jones, Gerald  
 Jones, Helen  
 Jones, Mr Kevan  
 Jones, Sarah  
 Jones, Susan Elan  
 Kane, Mike  
 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  
 Lloyd, Stephen  
 Lloyd, Tony  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 Lucas, Caroline  
 Lucas, Ian C.  
 Lynch, Holly  
 Madders, Justin  
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid  
 Mahmood, Shabana  
 Malhotra, Seema  
 Mann, John  
 Marsden, Gordon  
 Martin, Sandy  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Matheson, Christian  
 McCabe, Steve  
 McCarthy, Kerry  
 McDonagh, Siobhain  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonnell, rh John  
 McGinn, Conor  
 McGovern, Alison  
 McInnes, Liz  
 McKinnell, Catherine  
 McMahan, Jim  
 Mearns, Ian  
 Miliband, rh Edward  
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine  
 Moran, Layla  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Morgan, Stephen  
 Morris, Grahame  
 Murray, Ian  
 Nandy, Lisa  
 Norris, Alex  
 Onasanya, Fiona  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Osamor, Kate  
 Owen, Albert  
 Peacock, Stephanie  
 Pearce, Teresa  
 Pennycook, Matthew  
 Perkins, Toby  
 Phillips, Jess  
 Phillipson, Bridget  
 Pidcock, Laura  
 Platt, Jo  
 Pollard, Luke  
 Pound, Stephen  
 Powell, Lucy  
 Qureshi, Yasmin  
 Rayner, Angela  
 Reed, Mr Steve  
 Rees, Christina  
 Reeves, Ellie  
 Reeves, Rachel  
 Reynolds, Emma  
 Reynolds, Jonathan  
 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  
 Shuker, Mr Gavin  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Skinner, Mr Dennis  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Smeeth, Ruth  
 Smith, Angela  
 Smith, Cat  
 Smith, Eleanor  
 Smith, Laura  
 Smith, Nick  
 Smith, Owen  
 Snell, Gareth  
 Sobel, Alex  
 Spellar, rh John  
 Starmer, rh Keir  
 Stevens, Jo  
 Streeting, Wes  
 Stringer, Graham  
 Swinson, Jo  
 Tami, Mark  
 Thomas, Gareth  
 Thomas-Symonds,  
 Nick  
 Thornberry, rh Emily  
 Timms, rh Stephen  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Turley, Anna  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Twigg, Stephen  
 Twist, Liz  
 Umunna, Chuka  
 Vaz, Valerie  
 Walker, Thelma  
 Watson, Tom  
 West, Catherine  
 Western, Matt  
 Whitehead, Dr Alan  
 Williams, Dr Paul  
 Williamson, Chris  
 Wilson, Phil  
 Woodcock, John  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
**Thangam Debonnaire and**  
**Jeff Smith**

## NOES

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
Mr Paul Sweeney and

**Martin Whitfield**

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House believes that local government has severely suffered as a result of almost eight years of brutal and devastating cuts; notes with concern that the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that between 2010 and 2020 local government will have had direct funding cut by 79 per cent; is concerned that the top ten most deprived councils in England are set to see cuts higher than the national average, with nine on course for cuts more than three times higher than the national average; believes there is a risk that services and councils are reaching a financial breaking point; calls on the Government to act on the warnings of the National Audit Office and initiate a review into the funding of local government to ensure that the sector has sustainable funding for the long term and to immediately provide more resources to prevent more authorities following Conservative-run Northamptonshire into effective bankruptcy; and further calls on the Government to report to the House by Oral Statement and written report before 19 April 2018 on what steps it is taking to comply with this resolution.

**Andrew Gwynne:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Given the unanimous view of the House to accept Labour's motion on local government funding, and given that the motion ends with

"and further calls on the Government to report to the House by Oral Statement and written report before 19 April 2018 on what steps it is taking to comply with this resolution",

that is the clear view of Members. How can we ensure that it happens?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):** I think that the hon. Gentleman already knows the answer, but let me see if I can help a little. I am sure that the Government will reflect on the motion, but in the end, it is up to them, and unfortunately, it is not binding. I think that answers the question.

**Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con):** Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it right, Sir, that the Leader of the House has given an undertaking that within 12 weeks of such a vote she will make an oral statement to the House on it? Also, is it correct to record the vote as unanimous? If it had been unanimous, 650 MPs would have voted.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I do not think we ever have 650, as the hon. Gentleman well knows, but allowing for that, I think it is a written report back to the House rather than a verbal report.

## Police Funding

5.55 pm

**Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab):** I beg to move,

That this House asserts that the loss of 21,000 police officers, 18,000 police staff and 6,800 police community support officers since 2010 in addition to the reduction in the number of armed officers has damaged community safety and public security; is concerned that central government funding to local police forces will fall in real terms for the eighth consecutive year in 2018-19 and in addition that there will be a £54m shortfall in funding for counter-terror policing; notes with alarm the assessment of the National Police Chiefs Council that this will mean tough choices for policing in the year ahead; supports the conclusion of the UK Statistics Authority that the Prime Minister could have led the public to conclude incorrectly that the Government were providing an additional £450m for police spending in 2018-19; and calls on the Government to take steps to increase officer numbers by 10,000 and to fulfil the full counter-terrorism policing requirements laid out by police chiefs for the year ahead and to report to the House by Oral Statement and written report before 19 April 2018 on what steps it is taking to comply with this resolution.

I want to start by paying tribute to the men and women who serve in our police service. Last week many of us attended services in Westminster in memory of those who were killed or injured on Westminster bridge, as well as PC Keith Palmer who was murdered defending all of us in this House. The grief for his family, friends and colleagues is unimaginable, but I hope that in time they can draw comfort and strength from the bravery and heroism that he showed on that terrible day. I would also like to praise the bravery of Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey, whose recovery is ongoing after he attended the attempted murder in Salisbury, and the unnamed police officer from Greater Manchester who was injured in Whalley Range on Sunday by a man wielding a sword. The officer and his colleagues continued to contain the incident, despite their lives clearly being at risk. They are reminders, if ever one were needed, of the dangers that our police face every day to keep us safe.

Last time we debated police funding, the Minister repeatedly accused Labour Members of peddling fake news in saying that the Tory Government were cutting the police. It came as something of a surprise, and indeed a relief, to us and every police officer in the country to hear that policing was no longer being cut, yet last week the independent UK Statistics Authority ruled on those funding claims from the Government. It turns out that it was not fake news after all. Sir David Norgrove said that

"the Prime Minister's statement...could have led the public to conclude incorrectly that central government is providing an additional £450 million for police spending in 2018/19."

He has taken the unusual step of writing to the Home Office about the misleading tweets that were put out. Given that the Home Secretary confirmed to the Home Affairs Committee this morning that she would be complying with Sir David's advice from now on, I hope we do not hear those claims repeated in today's debate.

Also last week, the independent inspectorate of constabulary laid bare the breathtaking pressure that the police are now under, thanks to the financial constraints imposed on them by the Government and by rising demand. It said that it was still very concerned

"that policing is under significant stress. On occasions, that stress stretches some forces to such an extent that they risk being unable to keep people safe in some very important areas of policing."

The admission that the police service is at times unable to keep us safe should shock the House and spur the Government to action.

**Mike Hill** (Hartlepool) (Lab): In the past seven years, Government funding to Cleveland police has fallen in real terms by 39%, resulting in the loss of 450 officers and 50 police community support officers. Does my hon. Friend agree that community safety is suffering because of police cuts?

**Louise Haigh:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and the report from Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary makes that clear. Not only have we lost officers, but thousands of emergency calls are waiting in queues, with not enough officers to respond. Some victims facing an emergency get no response at all. Police have yet to assess the risk posed by over 3,300 individuals on the sex offender register. We simply do not know whether those individuals are a threat to the public. There is also a shortage of more than 5,000 investigative officers, as unsolved crimes rose to 2.1 million last year.

What is most striking about that assessment is that the problems facing the police are so clearly a result of having too few officers and staff to meet too high a demand.

**Mr Simon Clarke** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I would be very interested to know how the Opposition would make good their policing pledges and how they would fund them.

**Louise Haigh:** If the hon. Gentleman read Labour's manifesto, he would see that we committed to funding 10,000 neighbourhood officers by reversing the cuts to capital gains tax. That was laid out in our manifesto and forms part of the motion before the House, which we will have a welcome opportunity to vote on.

**Seema Malhotra** (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that crime has a cost? People and businesses are paying the price for the lack of policing to keep them safe in our communities, and it is high time the Government took that seriously.

**Louise Haigh:** Absolutely. If the Government were in opposition they would be crying bloody murder, because there is not only an economic but a human cost to the enormous rise in crime that we have seen as a result of their cuts in police funding.

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case. Does she accept that one of the hidden areas is small shop retail crime? Nowadays when goods have been stolen, it is virtually impossible to get a police officer to go to the scene of the crime, and as a result many smaller shops have gone out of business.

**Louise Haigh:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Small businesses are facing huge costs thanks to the cuts in police numbers. Many shoplifting offences are not prosecuted, and often police officers do not attend at all. The same applies to residential burglaries and many other crimes. Offenders are going scot-free because the police simply do not have the resources to attend.

Since the Tories came to power, we have lost 21,000 police officers, 18,000 police staff and 6,800 police community support officers, but I fear that, rather than facing up to this crisis, the Government are determined to try to spin their way out of it. This will be the eighth consecutive year in which Government funding for local forces has fallen.

**Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): We have lost nearly a third of our police strength in Westminster. Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the saddest aspects of the situation is the loss of the safer neighbourhood policing function, which has been critical not only in fighting crime but in building the community cohesion, relationships and crime prevention work that so many of my constituents now want to be rebuilt?

**Louise Haigh:** Neighbourhood policing is the bedrock of our policing system, and it has been the greatest loss following the police cuts of the last eight years. I shall say more about that shortly.

Between 2010 and 2015, cuts in policing amounted to £2.3 billion. At least in those days the Government used to admit that they were making cuts. Between 2015 and 2017, funding for local forces fell by a further £400 million in real terms, and in the year ahead central Government funding will fall by more than £100 million in real terms. It is an insult to the public and to the police that Ministers refuse to admit to those cuts.

The Government will know that in the year ahead, any increase in funds for local forces will only come through a hike in the council tax paid by local residents, and those residents will be angry at being asked to pay more and get less thanks to cuts that the Tories have made from Westminster. What is more, that method of funding the police is fundamentally unfair.

**Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): I appreciate that I have yet not been in the House for a year, but I am slightly confused. If the money does not come from taxation, where else does the hon. Lady think it comes from?

**Louise Haigh:** In their announcement on police funding, the Government attempted to claim to the public that they were making £450 million available. That is not the case. They are asking people to pay more in tax, and we are asking them to be clear about that. They are forcing local ratepayers to pay more for a lesser service because they are making real-terms cuts in police funding.

As I have said, funding the police through council tax is fundamentally unfair. Last week the chief constable of West Midlands police issued a warning about the aggressive use of council tax to raise funds, because the police forces that have already been forced to make the most cuts will raise the smallest amount of money. West Midlands, which has lost a staggering 2,000 officers since 2010, will be able to raise a little over 2% of its budget from the precept, and will still have to make substantial cuts next year thanks to the unfunded pay rise, pension fund strain and other inflationary pressures. Surrey, which has half the population of the west midlands, will raise almost the equivalent in cash terms.

**Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, as well as the funding issue, there are further demands on our police as a result of the failure of many other Government policies? The number of

[Toby Perkins]

homeless people, and the failure to deal with mental health issues, to which my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition referred earlier today, are putting additional pressures on the police at exactly the time when the Government are cutting the resources that they have.

**Louise Haigh:** That is absolutely right. While the Government have cut police funding to unprecedented levels, the demands on our police have also been unprecedented. Some 83% of calls to command and control centres are not crime related: they relate to vulnerabilities and mental health issues—as well as physical health issues, because the ambulance service is not able to attend. And they relate to missing people.

The police are increasingly unable to respond to the basic tasks that we ask of them, to tackle crime in our communities. Police chiefs have warned the Government about the issue time and again. They have warned that local policing is under such strain that the

“legitimacy of policing is at risk as the relationship with communities...is fading to a point where prevention, early intervention and core engagement...are...ineffective.”

**Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab):** When I tried to raise the issue of the 300 police officers lost in Suffolk last year, the Minister thought I had said “Southwark”, and tried to blame it on the Mayor of London. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is not the fault of the Mayor of London, the police and crime commissioner for Suffolk or any of the other police and crime commissioners around the country? It is the fault of the Government.

**Louise Haigh:** Absolutely. It is a trick of the Government to blame PCCs for cuts made to policing in their communities; PCCs can only play the hand they have been dealt by Westminster. The choices of the Mayor of London, who receives 70% of his budget from central Government, are few and far between.

As I said, neighbourhood policing is the absolute bedrock of the model of policing in this country. It is almost wholly responsible for building and maintaining relationships with communities and it is the eyes and ears of our counter-terror police. We need sustained and large-scale recruitment of police officers across the country. In the past year, the task has become even more urgent as the proportion of officers assigned to local policing has fallen by a further 10%. Little wonder, then, that crime is soaring: by 14% in the past year alone. Although we accept that police recording has improved, nothing can detract from the horrendous rises in knife and gun crime, at 21% and 20% respectively. People know that the challenges facing the police are many and multifaceted, but they also know that there are simply too few officers to meet too high a demand, and that means that community safety is put at risk.

The year just past has also seen a concerted and sustained increase in Islamist and far-right terrorism.

**Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab):** I put on the record my thanks to Assistant Chief Constable Russ Foster who led some of the work dealing with the “punish a Muslim day” letter at the north-east counter-terrorism unit. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the face

of policing is changing. Given the rise of the far right and increased referrals to Prevent, we should be putting more funding into the police force.

**Louise Haigh:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The increased pressure from far right and Islamist terrorism on the police is crippling our local forces. Although the Government have put some money into counter-terrorism, the demand that that then puts on local forces has simply not been covered by the Government’s police settlement. Mark Rowley, the outgoing head of counter-terrorism operations, told the Home Affairs Committee that his organisation has been dealing with a 30% uptick in operations. He warned:

“we have a bigger proportion of our investigations that are at the bottom of the pile and getting little or no work at the moment.”

The report by David Anderson QC on the four fatal attacks of last year drew the same conclusions. Those people know that counter-terrorism policing is under such strain that investigations into individuals of serious concern are being put on hold.

What was the Government’s response? They chose to underfund counter-terror policing to the tune of £54 million. With a terror threat now described by experts as “stratospheric”, it is unconscionable to leave such a black hole in our counter-terror budget.

The Minister has said time and again that he will ensure that the police have the resources they need to do their job. There will not be a chief constable in this country who can tell him they have the resources they need to fully protect the public and provide a professional service in the current climate.

The Government have failed in the most fundamental duty of any Government: to keep their citizens safe and free from harm. Their ideological cuts have left the public exposed to rising crime and a rising terrorism threat and they are letting down millions of victims as crimes go uninvestigated and unsolved. Today, MPs have the chance to put this right—to put community safety and security before ideology. I commend this motion to the House.

6.9 pm

**The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd):** Let me start with some common ground. I echo the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) in registering the profound respect and admiration of Government Members for the dedication, commitment and bravery of our police officers. She is quite right to remind us that in this last week alone we have taken the time to remember the sacrifice of PC Keith Palmer on the cobbles a few yards from here, as well as welcoming the discharge from hospital of Detective Sergeant Nick Bailey, and I am sure that we all want to wish the brave police officer in Manchester a speedy recovery from the injuries he incurred when confronting an individual armed with a sword. She was right to say that those are all powerful reminders of the dangers that our officers routinely face on our behalf every day in every force. Of course they deserve our thanks, but as I have said before, they deserve more than that. We have a responsibility to ensure that they have the right tools and resources to do the job properly.

I would welcome a proper debate on how we police modern Britain effectively in a digital age in which more and more crime takes place online, and at a time when

at last we as a society have got better at turning over the stones and supporting the victims of crimes that have been hidden for far too long, including domestic violence, sexual abuse and modern slavery. I would welcome a proper debate at this time of accelerating change when we have to be sure that police officers are more representative of the communities they serve and have the modern equipment and skills—not least digital skills—to stay on top of change. Judging by this motion, however, we will not be having that debate today.

**Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab): The Minister has rightly praised the bravery of our police forces in their working lives. Does he therefore agree that it is simply not fair to leave them overstretched, as is happening in my large rural constituency of High Peak, where the police have to fob off youths' antisocial behaviour by claiming that help and support are on the way when they know that that is not the case? The thin blue line is being stretched far too thinly, and this is putting the police in even more danger.

**Mr Hurd:** The thin blue line is stretched, and the Government recognise that. That is why we have brought forward a funding settlement that will see at least £450 million of new investment in our police system next year, and that will see this country investing over £1 billion more in our police system than we did in 2015-16. That is a funding settlement that the hon. Lady voted against.

**Sir Edward Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The Minister has just talked about £450 million. Does he agree with the view of Sir David Norgrove, the chair of the UK Statistics Authority, that the Prime Minister misled the public—

**Mr Mark Francois** (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Oh!

**Sir Edward Davey:** I said “the public”, and I am quoting the chair of the UK Statistics Authority, who said that the PM had misled the public over claims that there was an extra £450 million for the police in 2018-19.

**Mr Hurd:** I will come on to clarify the numbers in a way that I hope the right hon. Gentleman will welcome. As he knows from our debates on this subject, I have always made it clear that the police funding settlement is a combination of contributions from the central taxpayer and the local tax payer, and if we want more investment in policing, it is the taxpayer that pays. Also, the statisticians were quite clear in recognising that the complexities were getting over-complex in such things as tweets and PMQs.

**Toby Perkins:** Are not the rows of empty Benches behind the Minister the most powerful demonstration of the Conservative party's failure on policing? I am told that the Conservative Whips have had to text Tory MPs to ask them to come in and make those Benches look a bit fuller. Is it not an embarrassment that the party that once prided itself on law and order now has so few people who are willing to come in and defend its record on policing?

**Mr Hurd:** This side of the House voted for a funding settlement that will see additional investment of at least £450 million in our policing system; the other side of

the House voted against it. Having looked at the motion and having listened to the shadow Minister's speech, I recognise that the serious debate we need to have about how we police modern Britain will not happen today. In fact, the motion on the Order Paper contains the now predictable Labour cocktail of shroud waving, smokescreens, disregard for truth and complexity and, as we heard in the response to the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), the complete evasion of any detail of its own policies, which is a complete abdication of responsible opposition.

**David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab) *rose*—

**Mr Hurd:** I would be delighted to give way to a former police Minister.

**David Hanson:** Will the Minister confirm a few things for me? First, in May 2010, there were 21,000 more police officers on the beat than there are now. Secondly, the burden on the taxpayer was not as high. Thirdly, the level of crime was lower. Fourthly, during the five years of the coalition Government the Liberal Democrats—the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) just intervened—voted to cut police funding every time.

**Mr Hurd:** I am about to come on to the history before I get on to the future. Again, I find it disappointing that Labour's approach to the complexity of modern policing and its highly complex challenges is, as usual, to look back. Labour Members want to take us back to 2010, as the right hon. Gentleman has just encouraged me to do. Yes, we have a smaller police system than we did in 2010. Why? Because the coalition Government had to take radical action to get on top of a reckless and unsustainable deficit. Against a background of falling crime and stable demand on the police, it was recognised, not least by the thoughtful former shadow Home Secretary, Andy Burnham, that there was considerable scope to improve the efficiency of the police.

In London—our biggest force—we have broadly the same number of police officers as we did in 2008, we have less recorded crime than in 2008, and the police operation is costing the taxpayer £700 million a year less than in 2008. In Labour language, that means savage Tory cuts. To the rest of the world, it is a more efficient police force. I believed the Metropolitan Police Commissioner—*[Interruption.]* Labour MPs do not like to hear this, but I believed the commissioner, the excellent Cressida Dick, when she said:

“I think we can make some further savings. I am confident that the Met at the end of my commissionership might be smaller but could be as effective, if not more effective, through amongst other things the use of technology and different ways of working.”

As we are encouraged to look back, rather than forward, I want to take this opportunity to congratulate the police leadership and police and crime commissioners on their impressive work over the past seven years to deliver a more efficient service. I also recognise the contribution that frontline officers and staff have made to that process.

**Mr Francois:** On the behalf of my constituents, I thank the Minister for allowing greater flexibility in the police precept. In Essex, our excellent police, crime and fire commissioner, Roger Hirst, has taken full advantage of the precept, so that we will now be reinforced by an

[*Mr Francois*]

extra 150 police officers, which will take the Essex constabulary back up to 3,000 police, and we warmly welcome them.

**Mr Hurd:** I thank my right hon. Friend and other Essex MPs for making representations on behalf of Essex, as other MPs across the House have done for their areas. The point that the shadow Minister deliberately missed is that PCCs asked for that additional flexibility, and she also ignored the fact that they received overwhelming approval when they went to the public and asked the question. It is hypocritical to accuse us of unfair taxation and of using council tax to fund local policing, as Labour is the party that doubled council tax when it was in power. I am not taking any lessons on preventive taxation from the Labour party.

**Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Seventeen young people have been murdered in London since the start of this year, and there is a lack of community policing. We need local links with policing, and police officers should visit schools. What does the Minister have to say about that?

**Mr Hurd:** I completely share the hon. Lady's concern and dismay about the rise of serious violent crime not just on the streets of London but elsewhere. I will come back to that.

As a London MP, I would point out that we have broadly the same number of police officers as we did in 2008-09, when we last saw a spike in knife crime. This is not just about policing or police numbers; it is about the political will to work together to bear down on the problem. We should look back at the success of the previous Mayor of London and his deputy, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), in applying pressure on the problem to move from 28 or 29 deaths a year down to eight. That is eight too many, but there was real movement, which had nothing to do with the number of police officers—the number stayed the same. It was about strategy and political will.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Is it not noticeable that the Opposition's case is entirely predicated on the amount we spend and on the numbers, not on effectiveness and outcomes? My right hon. Friend will be pleased to know that, due to a combination of better procurement, smarter use of technology, using community psychiatric nurses embedded in police teams and raising extra funding from the precept, the Sussex police and crime commissioner will recruit an additional 200 police officers in each of the next four years. That is what we can do when we think smart, rather than just getting obsessed with the amount of money spent.

**Mr Hurd:** I could not agree more. We are in an environment in which resources are limited, which puts pressure on our system to innovate and work together in new ways. There is excellent leadership in Sussex from Katy Bourne, and I am delighted that we have enabled Sussex to increase the precept to do more and deliver what the people of Sussex want.

**Mr Francois:** Can we just nail the point about whether PCCs asked for this flexibility? Roger Hirst in Essex conducted a survey to ask people across the county whether they would be prepared to pay a little more in council tax in return for more police, and he received a resounding yes.

**Mr Hurd:** Yes, he did, and he was not alone. There has been overwhelming support wherever the question has been asked, which is why Roger Hirst and others are on record as supporting the settlement for providing additional funding for police forces in 2018-19. This debate is a complete red herring from the Labour party. If we want increased investment in our policing, it has to be paid for. There are only two ways of paying: either we increase borrowing and the taxpayer pays interest on that borrowing, or we increase taxation. The vast majority of funding for our police system still comes from the central taxpayer, and we felt it appropriate to ask whether people would be prepared to pay an additional 25p a week to support local policing. Not surprisingly, the overwhelming answer was yes.

**Stephen Twigg** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister accept that relying on council tax for increased police funding is fundamentally regressive? Surrey raises half the money locally and Merseyside gets 80% of its funding from central Government. An equivalent increase in council tax gets a lot more for Surrey than it does for Merseyside. It is fundamentally regressive.

**Mr Hurd:** I wish the hon. Gentleman had made that argument when he was a member of a Government who doubled council tax. He is right that there is a long-standing issue with variation in the amount of money that forces raise from precepts, which cannot be sorted in one settlement. That is why, to try to create more fairness across the system, this settlement is structured on the basis that PCCs could increase their precept by a number of pounds rather than by a percentage. Again, I make the point that Labour has created a straw man because, even with these changes, the reality is that around three quarters of funding for our police system still comes from the centre. Very little has changed.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): The Minister is right about the need for innovation. In Northamptonshire, we now have a senior fire officer effectively in charge of community policing, while a police officer and a fire officer share a patrol vehicle to go around rural areas. At an operational level, it is dovetailing very nicely in Northamptonshire, but we need the Minister to sign off the transfer of governance from the county council to the police and crime commissioner so we can square the circle.

**Mr Hurd:** I thank my hon. Friend, not least for his persistence in making that point. He points to Northamptonshire as a beacon of what efficient smart working and collaboration can deliver. I expect to have news on the fire governance issue shortly.

**Sir Edward Davey** *rose*—

**Mr Hurd:** I have given way at least once to the right hon. Gentleman and I need to make some progress so that Back Benchers can participate in this debate.

So much for the past—we are not in 2010 now. Things have changed, not least the pattern of demand on the police, and when demand changes, so must we. Of course, as the Office for National Statistics—our independent national statisticians—makes clear, the most reliable indicator of crime trends in the UK is the national crime survey, and it shows very clearly, although Labour never mentions this, that the long-term trend of our constituents' experience of traditional crime is down; it is down by almost 40% since 2010. That is the most reliable indicator of crime, according to our independent statisticians, and it shows a long-term trend of our constituents' experience of crime continuing to go down. We are talking about 10% year on year, and 40% since 2010. That is to be welcomed, because what is happening in crime needs to be understood. It is complicated, but this is where I take umbrage, because the Labour party is deliberately misrepresenting the situation as far as I can see. We should welcome the trend that the official ONS statistics show, which is that people's experience of crime continues to fall—

**Sandy Martin** *rose*—

**Mr Hurd:** Let me just finish this sentence. The Government are not remotely complacent about that or out of touch with what is happening on the ground. We are well aware that the terrorist risk has evolved and escalated. Since the serious and organised crime strategy was published in 2013, the serious and organised crime threat, which is often not visible to our constituents, has evolved rapidly. We have made significant progress, but we believe there is more we can do to generate a truly comprehensive response, which is why we will publish a new serious and organised crime strategy later this year. As has been mentioned, we are seeing a genuine increase in so-called “low volume, high impact” serious violent crime—there is no getting away from that—which is devastating in its impact. Everyone in the House will share a concern to get on top of that, and we fully intend to do so with the forthcoming launch of the serious violence strategy.

**Vicky Foxcroft:** Does the Minister know when the serious violence strategy will actually be published?

**Mr Hurd:** It is imminent—and that does mean imminent.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley is right; there is absolutely no doubt that our police are busier than ever. We saw a spike in emergency calls last summer, which has tailed off a bit but did cause problems. Recorded crime has increased significantly. Recorded crime is obviously not the same as people's experience of crime and it is not what the national crime survey is tracking; obviously, it tracks what the police record. So what is happening there? Again, it is important to be clear about that and to get independent assessment from our statisticians. These are independent statisticians, not me, making it clear that most of this growth is down to two factors. The first is that the police are getting better at recording crime. She registered that, and she will know that they have been criticised for poor performance on that in the past.

Secondly and crucially, and I hope the House will welcome this, we are getting more victims of hidden crime coming forward with allegations that need investigating. This matters enormously, because for far

too long victims of domestic abuse, sexual abuse, rape and modern slavery have not stepped forward, in part because they did not trust the system. The Prime Minister, the former Home Secretary, deserves great credit for this, because she challenged the police to be better at safeguarding the vulnerable and going after hidden crime. When I go to Manchester and I speak to the lady who runs the modern slavery unit there, she shows me a graph detailing an alarming increase in the incidents it is investigating, but she is the first to point out, “Minister, this is not new crime. This has been going on for a very long time. We are just getting better at finding it and investigating.” That is the undercurrent of the shift in recorded crime and if that reflects better police practice and more public confidence in our police system, as we are told, surely that is welcome.

However, it is undeniable that the shift in demand and these investigations are taking the police into more complex and time-consuming work, and that does mean that our police are stretched, as evidenced by the recent Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services PEEL report on effectiveness, which clearly indicated that a minority of forces are struggling to manage demand.

**Sandy Martin** *rose*—

**Mr Hurd:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his patience and give way to him.

**Sandy Martin:** Does the Minister accept that although the crime survey tends to give a better representation of the crimes that are apparent to the people who take part in it, people who are involved in drug-related and gang-related crime are far less likely to take part in it, meaning that those sorts of crimes are not reflected so well in the survey?

**Mr Hurd:** The independent statisticians at the ONS say that the survey, which has run for many years across many thousands of households and been used by successive Labour and Conservative Governments as the most reliable indicator of crime trends, is just that: our most reliable indicator. It is not perfect, but it is our most reliable indicator. It would be quite wrong of me and Conservative Members not to point out, against all shroud waving and talk about soaring crime, that the clear data from the most reliable indicator of crime trends shows that crime is going down. Except—it is very important to say this—we are seeing a genuine increase in low-volume, very high-impact serious violent crime. We are determined to get on top of that.

**Sir Edward Davey:** That is the point on which I wanted the Minister to reflect earlier. He is quite right about the survey evidence and right about some of the increase in recorded crime being down to better reporting and new, more complex crime, but it is absolutely clear that some serious crimes—gun crime, knife crime and the like—are rising. The ONS statisticians are clear in their reports on the crime statistics that there is an increase. I hope the Minister will confirm that and say what he is going to do about it.

**Mr Hurd:** I have confirmed that. I acknowledged explicitly, on the record, that that is the one area in which there is clearly a genuine increase. Because the

[Mr Hurd]

consequences are devastating and it is massively unsettling for people, it is absolutely a top priority for the Home Office and the Government to get on top of it. The action we are taking is in the serious violence strategy which, as I have said, is imminent.

The point I am trying to make is that the Government recognise that there has been a shift in the pattern of demand on the police. We have listened to concerns and responded accordingly, because this is not new. The Prime Minister, who was the previous Home Secretary, recognised that when from 2015, despite the public finances still being in a difficult situation, she led the decision to protect overall police budgets in real terms.

**Naz Shah:** This year marks the 25th anniversary of the death of Stephen Lawrence and 20 years since the launch of the Macpherson inquiry. When she was Home Secretary, the Prime Minister committed to there being a much more diverse workforce. The truth is that the Minister can pick and choose from the numbers that represent how crime is recorded, but he cannot pick and choose the numbers on the diversity of our police forces. What is he going to do to support the Jon Boutchers of this world who are leading on this agenda?

**Mr Hurd:** I could not agree more with the hon. Lady about the importance of that agenda. We police by consent, on the basis of trust. That gets harder if the police are seen to be less and less representative of the communities that they serve. It is a long-standing challenge and I completely agree on that. In fairness to the police, the numbers are the best they have been for a very long time, although they are nowhere near where they need to be, not least in terms of leadership role models. It is an issue not just of retention but of how officers are retained and managed through the system. Where the police are taking positive action—I have sat with the Greater Manchester police sergeant who has led the work—they have really moved the needle. If people apply themselves to this issue, what can be done is really impressive, and it is really not rocket science. I have sat next to the Home Secretary at a roundtable on exactly this subject, and our message to police chiefs is that we need to see much more action. The Greater Manchester chief is bringing a plan to the chiefs on exactly that, to find a gear change on the need to improve the diversity of our police force. It is hugely important to us and, assuming the plan is sensible, we will get right behind it. I thank the hon. Lady for raising that important point.

I was talking about the decision of the current Prime Minister to protect police budgets in real terms from 2015. It means that, in 2017-18, we are spending £12.6 billion of public money on our police system compared with £11.9 billion in 2016—an increase of £700 million. As this shift in demand continues, we have recognised the need to go further. Having done our own demand review—a process in which I spoke to, or visited, every police force in England and Wales—we brought to this House what we believe to be a comprehensive funding settlement for 2018-19 and, for the first time, set a direction of travel for 2019-20. In the debate on the settlement back in December, I made it very clear that the settlement, as always, is a combined contribution from the central taxpayer and the local tax payer. I also

made it clear that final numbers depended on how police and crime commissioners responded to their new flexibility in relation to precept.

Following the statistical release from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government this morning, I can now confirm what the funding settlement will deliver in 2018-19, and this is based on now hard information on what PCCs will do. I can confirm that we will see an increase of £282 million in council tax precept funding for police forces next year, and a £460 million increase in total funding. We will publish further information on these revised figures shortly.

I hope that the whole House will welcome confirmation of the increase in funding on the assumptions that we made when the settlement went through Parliament—opposed by Labour. All forces will see their direct resource funding protected in real terms in 2018-19, including council tax precept—opposed by Labour. The proportion of forces' direct resource funding—grant plus money raised through the precept—will increase slightly in 2018-19, compared with 2017-18. It will increase from 30% to 32%.

I hope that the House will welcome the plans put forward by most PCCs to use the additional precept income to protect or improve frontline policing. For example, we have heard about Essex and about Sussex, but in Kent, the PCC, Matt Scott, has empowered the chief constable to recruit around 200 new officers—the largest recruitment drive in the force for several years. In Nottinghamshire, the PCC aims to increase police officer numbers from 1,840 to around 2,000 over the next two years. In Avon and Somerset, the PCC will recruit 300 new police officers and strengthen neighbourhood policing.

Looking ahead to 2019-20, I indicated our willingness to allow PCCs to increase the precept by a similar amount, subject to progress on some efficiency and productivity milestones that we are agreeing with the police and the PCCs. Let me be clear about the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), because we never hear anything about productivity or efficiency from Labour—[*Interruption.*] No, we do not. We do not ever hear anything. After all these years of belt tightening and austerity, it is still agreed with the police chiefs that there is still at least an additional £100 million a year of inefficiencies on the table which could be saved through more intelligent procurement. After all this time, there are still those savings on the table, and we will continue to pursue them.

The motion mentions concerns about counter-terrorism funding, and we take those very seriously. The Minister for Security and Economic Crime will directly address them in his wind-up, but we are well aware that the threat that we face from terrorism is becoming more complex and more hidden. Funding for counter-terrorism policing has grown steadily since 2010, and the 2015 spending review and strategic defence and security review protected funding for CT policing until 2020-21.

This year, we have provided £28 million of new money to CT policing, going to forces across the country to meet costs relating to those attacks. Separately, we have also provided £9.8 million in special grant funding to cover the cost of the police response to the Manchester arena attack, and a further £7.6 million in special grant funding to London.

I can also confirm—I hope that the House will welcome it—that we have agreed £1.6 million in special grant funding for Wiltshire police this financial year, and further funding as its investigation continues. It is, of course, critical that we ensure that counter-terrorism policing has the resources needed to deal with the threat that we face. That is why, in 2018-19, the counter-terrorism policing budget will go up by 7%, increasing by £50 million of entirely new money to at least £757 million.

**David Hanson:** The Minister will recognise that armed police response units are critical. He will know that there were 6,906 armed police officers in 2010 and that, as of last March, there are now 6,278—a reduction of 628 or 9% overall. Will the Minister tell us whether that figure changed or moved in the past 12 months, and where does he see the restoration of armed policing?

**Mr Hurd:** Allow me to correct a misunderstanding. There is a separate additional funding commitment of £144 million to uplift our armed police capability. We are significantly increasing the number of specialist firearms officers. Once the uplift programme is complete, there will be around 7,000 armed officers—exceeding the number in 2010—in England and Wales who will be better trained and better equipped than ever before.

It is important that we talk about cyber-crime, not least because Labour Members do not, which is surprising because it is the fastest growing source of crime. It is quite clear that our constituents—the public—are increasingly much more likely to be exposed to crime through their computers than they are on the high street. It is a relatively new type of crime. Forces are learning how to better investigate these crimes and support the victims. There are lots of challenges, not least in aligning our local, regional and national capability, and that is why the national cyber-security strategy for 2016 to 2021 is supported by £1.9 billion of transformational investment. I could not begin to tell the House what Labour's plans are to protect people from cyber-crime; I doubt Labour Members know.

We are living in a period of rapid change. Crime is changing, demand on police is changing, the police are changing and technology is changing everything very fast. But one thing is constant: the unconditional commitment of a Conservative Government to public safety, and upholding law and order. Labour voted against a police settlement that will see an additional £460 million of public investment in our police system next year, including a significant uplift in the counter-terrorism budget. It will mean that this country will be investing £13 billion of public money in our police system next year, which is an increase of over £1 billion on 2015-16. That is a big number. Here is an even bigger number: £55 billion. That is what the Office for Budget Responsibility predicts the country will spend on paying interest on our national debt—debt that was racked up by Labour.

Despite the constraints, we continue to invest to support the police and to work closely with them, including on the serious violence strategy, and on the development of mobile working to transform the productivity of police officers and give them more time on the frontline. We are developing a national wellbeing programme to support frontline officers, and working with the police to develop a long-term vision of what digital technology can do for British policing. All this is

to ensure that we do everything we can so that Britain continues to have a modern police force that is on top of change, not chasing it, and that is fit for the challenges of the 21st century.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Before I call the spokesman for the Scottish National party, it will be obvious to the House that a great many people wish to speak and that there is limited time available. Therefore, there will be a time limit of six minutes after the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) has spoken. I give this warning in order that hon. Members who wish to catch my eye can tailor their remarks accordingly.

6.43 pm

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is appropriate in a debate on police funding that we reflect on the sacrifice made by officers such as PC Keith Palmer, on the bravery of Nick Bailey and on the work of other officers who daily serve to protect our freedoms in Scotland and elsewhere.

I am grateful to be able to take part in this debate on the Tory Government's cuts to the police budget in England and Wales. As an SNP MP, I am thankful that Scotland has a separate legal system and that, as such, despite the real-terms cuts to the Scottish Government's block grant, the SNP has chosen a different path since taking office. While police forces in England and Wales have lost over 13% of their officers since 2007 as a result of UK Government cuts, the Scottish force has grown by 1,000 officers in the same period. With recorded crime at a 43-year low, that is a good result. However, we can never be complacent and we will continue to keep identifying areas of concern to make sure that the public are served better.

The situation facing forces in England and Wales is reaching a critical point. The Tory Government's failure to support the police adequately has forced local authorities in England to ask local taxpayers to pay more in council tax to fill the funding gap. This financial pressure has led to the Metropolitan police issuing a serious warning to the UK Government that officer numbers could fall by 27,500 by 2021, hindering their ability to tackle local crime and to engage in counter-terrorism measures.

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman talks about the need to protect against Tory austerity and the cuts that that entails, but does he agree that today's announcement by the Scottish Police Authority in its draft budget that 100 officers might be cut to save £2.7 million is an unfortunate and regrettable action?

**Drew Hendry:** There certainly should be more funding supplied to Scotland. It would have been good if the hon. Gentleman had got behind the call for Scotland to get the VAT that was paid backdated in order to support that, so that some £140 million could have gone into making sure that we could do an even better job.

As I said, this financial pressure has caused problems for the Metropolitan police. Indeed, former Met Detective Chief Inspector Colin Sutton has said:

"The Met has little choice but to re-organise. It has to do something to meet increased demand with a reduced workforce and fewer buildings after successive cuts to its budget."

[Drew Hendry]

That is an important point. At a time when violent crime is rising in England, the UK Government's response is to enforce cuts, reducing local police numbers and adding to officers' already stretched workload.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): West Yorkshire police have in excess of 1,000 fewer officers now than in 2010, which is obviously having an impact on response times—if people are responded to at all. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is difficult for the Conservatives to call themselves the party of law and order in this context?

**Drew Hendry:** Indeed. We have seen that where there are fewer officers, there is more crime. Where we have additional officers—for example, in Scotland, as I have said—the impact on crime has been the exact opposite.

The funding pressures facing the Met should concern us all, particularly considering the counter-terrorism work that they engage in to keep us all safe. According to Sophie Linden, London's deputy Mayor for policing:

“The terrorist attacks put big demands on counter-terrorism policing, but also on the Met police. For every pound spent by counter-terrorism policing, £2 is spent out of the Met budget to respond.”

The UK Government simply cannot jeopardise counter-terrorism work. I encourage them to engage with the London authorities to ensure that they have all the necessary resources to continue their excellent work to keep Londoners, and all who work in or visit the city, safe from the evils of terrorism.

I am not likely to be chatting on many doorsteps in England and Wales, but when I am out speaking to my constituents in Inverness, Badenoch and Strathspey, one of the priorities they want for their communities is to see our local police officers walking our streets—in our city, our towns and our villages. I am sure that voters in England and Wales would like to see the same level of policing in their communities. The anger felt by people across England and Wales towards this Government's unwillingness to support the police properly is therefore completely understandable.

I can also appreciate the anger regarding the UK Government's spin about their cuts to police budgets. This was wrong not only for the public but for those who keep us safe. It must have been embarrassing for the Prime Minister when she was rebuked about her claims that the Government were providing additional funding to local police forces. The chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir David Norgrove, released a statement on this point, saying that the Prime Minister's claim could have led the public to conclude “incorrectly” that the Government were providing an extra £450 million for police spending over the next financial year. I am sure that the funding outlined by the Minister today will come under the same kind of scrutiny. The Government cannot hide behind political spin. They need to respect the police and the public and provide the genuine funding that will help keep communities safe.

**Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con): The hon. Gentleman speaks about political spin on decisions. Does he regret the SNP Government's decision to centralise our eight police forces into one national force—Police Scotland?

When he is knocking on doors in Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, do his constituents tell him that our service is poorer as a result of that?

**Drew Hendry:** Everything that the hon. Gentleman says is belied by the statistics and the reports that have come out. Crime is at a 43-year low. It is down nearly 40%. People feel safer on their streets in Scotland, which I will come to later.

If this Government can find £1 billion for the Democratic Unionist party down the back of the sofa, they can support their police properly. They only need to find and show the political will to do so. The Scottish Government have set an example of how to support our police forces. One reason why the SNP continues to be popular is that we recognise how important a well-funded police service is to local—[*Interruption.*] Scottish Tory Members shout from a sedentary position, but they obviously have not looked at the recent polls, which underline what is going on.

**Douglas Ross:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Drew Hendry:** I will make some progress, but I may come back to the hon. Gentleman later.

We recognise how important a well-funded police service is to local people. One of our most popular and effective policies was, as I said, recruiting 1,000 additional police officers. When I knock on doors in Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, people say they are grateful that there are more police visible in their communities these days.

That is in stark contrast with the Tory Government's shameful record, which has seen police numbers fall by over 13% from 2007 to 2017. In reality, that means there are 32 officers per 10,000 people in Scotland, compared with only 21 officers per 10,000 in England and Wales. That is over 50% more police officers in Scotland.

The Scottish Government understand that our police authorities have to be equipped for the demands of the 21st century. However, meeting those demands does not mean abandoning the principle of local policing. I am delighted that the Scottish Government's “Policing 2026” strategy sets out a commitment to retaining police numbers and to the value of local policing. It is because of that that the public continue to have confidence in our police forces.

The Scottish crime and justice survey shows that public confidence in policing is strong, with the majority of people responding to the survey saying that local police are doing an excellent job. Indeed, the survey said that people in Scotland feel safer than ever before, with 77% saying they feel safe or very safe in their neighbourhoods after dark—the highest score ever recorded by the survey. It also estimated that overall crime had fallen by a third since 2008-09.

**Douglas Ross:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He has twice mentioned crime falling. Does he accept the criticism that the SNP has received in Scotland for underestimating violent crime? In Scotland, if someone is punched, kicked or even hit with a weapon, that is classed as an offence and not a violent crime. The official victim toll of just under 7,000 rockets to under 70,000 when we include all assaults.

**Drew Hendry:** The hon. Gentleman tries bravely but daftly to contradict the experiences of the Scottish people. I have just given the statistics from the survey conducted, which showed that people felt safer than ever before in Scotland. That is a fairly desperate attempt.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Many of my constituents feel that rural police forces have added challenges, as the population is spread across a large area. Does he agree that in reviewing the central grant and how it is allocated, the Government should strengthen the criteria used to determine the specific needs of rural areas?

**Drew Hendry:** That is an excellent suggestion for the communities the hon. Gentleman represents.

As I have said, it is because of the value of local policing that the public continue to have confidence in our police forces in Scotland. However, sustaining healthy police numbers is not an end goal in itself, as we want more police on the beat to create safer communities. It is no coincidence that, as has been mentioned, recorded crime in Scotland has fallen by about 40% in the past decade. It is important to stress that that is down to the hard work of police officers across Scotland in doing their job. Although I am not for one minute saying that everything is perfect in Scotland, the UK Government could follow in the footsteps of the Scottish Government and work with our police forces, instead of against them.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that an excellent example of where Scotland has led on policing and reducing violent crime is the work of the violence reduction unit in Glasgow? It has had a huge impact with a reduction in knife crime and violent crime, particularly among young people, in the city.

**Drew Hendry:** That is an excellent example of an initiative that is delivering real results for people and, in this instance, improving safety for people, and lessons from it are being rolled out across Scotland to improve policing.

As we look to future challenges, it is worth noting that Brexit may pose serious problems about how to tackle crime, terrorism and security threats. Membership of the EU has been massively helpful in the fight against crime and terrorism, due to agencies such as Europol. This allows our countries to work together against criminals and crimes that do not respect national borders—hard or soft. We should all be concerned that the Home Affairs Committee has concluded that it will be incredibly difficult to replicate similar arrangements after Brexit. The UK Government and the Brexiteers have got us into a mess, and they must find a way to ensure that we are able to combat international terrorism and organised crime after Brexit.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Was the hon. Gentleman as surprised as I was—I am a member of the Home Affairs Committee—to hear this morning from the Home Secretary that for these two years her Department will have been granted nearly £500 million to deal with the cost of Brexit? That will be spent on computer systems, customs officers, border officials and so on, instead of the 9,000 police officers it could have paid for.

**Drew Hendry:** The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about the priorities for investment, and about policies being pursued that will actually put those priorities at serious risk, if not rule them out of being implemented at all. This is one area where the narrative should not be about a hard Brexit at all costs.

The challenges facing police budgets and counter-terrorism activities should concern us all. Our police officers protect us each and every day that they are on the beat. As many of us have experienced right here in Parliament, when trouble arises and we are told to run away from it, police officers run towards it, helping to keep us safe. The UK Government should finally do the right thing, and give the police the same level of support that those officers show us.

**Mr Sweeney:** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your advice regarding the amendment and correction of the record. In the previous speech, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) claimed that Labour had not supported VAT refunds to the Scottish police service. In reality, Labour's stated position at the autumn statement was that we called for a VAT exemption of £140 million to be refunded, with the money to be ring-fenced and earmarked for the emergency services in Scotland. Will you advise me on how the record might be amended?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** I think the hon. Gentleman knows—he has not been here for very long, but he is a quick learner—that that is not a point of order for the Chair. It is a point of debate in the very debate in which we are engaging at the moment. The way in which he can put his point to the House is to speak in the debate, or to intervene on someone else in order to make it. However, he does not now need do so, having made his point very well—although not, I have to say, in the right way or at the right time.

6.59 pm

**Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I commend the speech by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, who spoke with a lot of sense and compassion about policing. He recognises that if we had countless amounts of money, we would love to spend a lot more, but that we need to be careful about how we spend money, because it is not our money; it is the people's money—taxpayers' money.

I associate myself with the remarks that everybody has made about the fantastic work that police forces do on our behalf. The police often run towards danger, when our natural instinct is to run away from it. Sometimes, as we have seen here in Parliament, people lose their lives looking after the people they are paid to protect. No one can fail to be very grateful for the work that they do at all times on our behalf.

**Ruth George:** The hon. Lady represents a constituency in Derbyshire, as do I. Is she not concerned, as I am, that police in Derbyshire tell me that they are being put in more danger because of the cuts? There are 411 fewer officers, so police officers have to respond to dangerous incidents on their own, putting them in even more danger than they should be in.

**Mrs Latham:** I thank the hon. Lady for that comment. I will talk a lot about Derbyshire. I recognise that she came into the House recently, but the number of police officers is broadly similar to what we have had for some time.

When Members of Parliament met the police and crime commissioner, Councillor Hardy Dhindsa, recently, he was not able to tell us how he would spend more money if he got it, he could not tell us what his budget covered and he was not able to give us any facts whatsoever. We have looked at his budget, and he is not as desperate for funding as he claims.

Interestingly, the police and crime commissioner spends a lot of his time going around parish councils in Derbyshire, frightening the life out of parish councillors, who do their very best for the people they represent, often with no political affiliation—certainly in my area. He is telling them that there are cuts, so he cannot do this and he cannot do that. He has got rid of most of the police in the rural areas I represent. The parish councillors are really worried about the future when they do not need to be. Yes, he has closed police stations and reduced services in much of my area, but the area that he represents as a councillor does not have to face any cuts. He should look much more at how he can spend the money more efficiently and effectively, because in Derbyshire, as in most places, the majority of the funding comes from the Government grant and the rest comes from council tax.

The police in Derbyshire are having to do many more things than they used to do, particularly in respect of domestic violence, rape and modern slavery in particular, which there has been a lot of in Derbyshire. There has also been grooming of young girls. With Operation Retriever, it was the first place in the country where it was found that young men were grooming girls and trafficking them. We have prosecuted many people successfully for that.

Since 2011, Derbyshire police have put significant amounts of money into their reserves. Between 2010 and 2016, during the so-called austerity period, the reserves increased by 60%, yet the number of police officers went down by more than 18%. Those numbers are now going up—the police are recruiting as we speak. The police and crime commissioner justifies the need for more money by saying that he faces cuts.

**Eddie Hughes:** I make no comment other than to say that my understanding is that in the west midlands, the police and crime commissioner has reserves of more than £100 million.

**Mrs Latham:** My hon. Friend makes a valid point. Why do police and crime commissioners need these enormous reserves when they talk about cuts all the time?

**Sarah Jones** (Croydon Central) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Mrs Latham:** No, I will not.

Derbyshire was the only force nationally not to sign up for the outsourcing of back-office services, a measure that was proposed to increase efficiency and make savings during this so-called period of austerity. Clearly, that is a logical way to save money by being much more

efficient. Similar-sized forces in Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire, which surround Derbyshire, have smaller reserves than Derbyshire.

Derbyshire police were saving up money to spend some of it—only some of it—on a new fire and police headquarters, which was desperately needed, but that was not all the money they kept. I was very interested to see that Essex has a police, fire and crime commissioner—the first in the country. I might recommend that if I thought it would be good for Derbyshire, but with the current incumbent, it certainly would not be good for Derbyshire because he would not know where his budget was.

The police and crime commissioner for Derbyshire clearly does not want to increase efficiency and make savings. It is clearly an ideological decision by this left-wing police and crime commissioner who does not want to change anything, because he wants to blame it all on the Conservative Government. There are lots of examples of waste: in the last budget, he proposed extra expenditure provisions—much more spending than has ever been spent before—on hotels and conferences. Now, why would that be when he says he cannot afford police officers?

**Ruth George:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Mrs Latham:** No, I will not give way. I have limited time. I am sorry.

It is clearly better to have better budgeting, which he needs to be implementing considering the income generated by Derbyshire police through such methods as vehicle maintenance and property leasing. I find it concerning that between 2014-15 and 2015-16 catering expenses have doubled. That money could have been spent on police officers, who we need for the additional crimes they need to investigate, such as cyber-crime and the pornography that is being generated and people are watching in Derbyshire.

The Derbyshire police need to spend money on their IT systems, which are very out of date, and they need to look at the terrible situation, faced by all areas of the country, of trying to keep tabs on the perpetrators of terrorism. We have had them in Derby. We have had terrorist suspects, shootings and all sorts of things over many years. The police and crime commissioner needs to look at how he can focus his efforts on proper policing, giving value for money for the people of Derbyshire and providing a much better service.

7.7 pm

**Anna Turley** (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I am extremely glad that we are having this debate this evening, because crime and antisocial behaviour is the number one issue raised with me on the doorstep, in my surgery and in my mailbox.

People in my community are deeply concerned about rising crime and antisocial behaviour. They tell me they are scared of leaving the house after dark and many say they feel besieged by the antisocial behaviour they see in their local areas. They are angry at the devastating damage being done, and I have received a huge number of petitions calling for more officers. Many people have attended public meetings to share their concerns. Local businesses on Redcar High Street and across our town centres in Eston, Normanby, Grangetown, South Bank,

Ormesby, Dormanstown, and Marske have all told me they fear the threat of burglaries and damage to property, which is on the rise. As the Minister knows, these businesses already feel the pressure from huge job losses and stagnant wages in our area.

We have had a number of public meetings recently called by residents—not by politicians—who are desperate for action. I attended one recently in east Redcar. This is what people told me. One elderly lady said:

“We are too afraid to leave our homes after dark. We feel under siege in our own community.”

Another resident told me:

“When I am coming in on a night I feel very vulnerable.”

Another said:

“Whatever niceties are put in place in this town will be ruined in this lawless place.”

Another said:

“Bring back our police. At the moment it’s such a scary place to live.”

It gives me no pleasure to say that because Redcar is a fantastic place to live. I know that as a resident. It is full of wonderful people, but a small minority are causing problems. The police are desperate to tackle them, but they feel that they are working with at least one hand tied behind their back because their resources are stretched so thinly.

The crime statistics for our area are deeply worrying. Reported crime across the Cleveland police area has increased by 18.3% since 2010, when the Conservative Government came into office. For Redcar and Cleveland Borough, violent crime in particular is up by a massive 46.4% since March 2011. That is absolutely shocking.

**Mr Simon Clarke:** The hon. Lady and I share Redcar and Cleveland Borough between us. I fully accept that there is concern about crime, but there is also a question about how resource is allocated within the borough. Does she concede that Cleveland police have, I think, the fourth highest ratio of officers per head of population of any force in the country?

**Anna Turley:** I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. He has made the point about resources before. Given his concern about moving resources to east Cleveland, I ask him where exactly he would like to take those resources from. Whether they come from Redcar, Middlesbrough, Stockton or Hartlepool, we are all stretched for resources. He has made that point before, but resources are stretched extremely thin.

It is no coincidence that crime has gone up when there are fewer officers on our streets. The introduction of neighbourhood policing was a massive step forward in tackling crime and making people feel safe. The last Labour Government made it a priority to ensure that local neighbourhoods had their own dedicated teams, with a visible and accessible presence. Sadly, that important initiative is being slowly eroded. I do not for one moment fault the work of our police force, which has been fantastic. Our hard-working men and women are doing their utmost to protect our communities, but when there are fewer people to cover the same ground and deal with more crime, they are swimming against the tide, and the Government must take responsibility.

**Stephen Doughty:** I, too, have a Grangetown in my constituency. We also suffer from challenges from drugs, antisocial behaviour, burglaries and so on, but a big difference is that the Welsh Labour Government continue to invest in police community support officers in our communities in Wales, so we have that presence in communities that is able to respond to issues. It is not perfect, but at least we have that resource on the street in communities.

**Anna Turley:** My hon. Friend makes a really important point. I envy him for having that support. We have lost over 50 PCSOs in our area. They provided that visible reassurance to the public and were there as the eyes and ears for our police force. That vital role has been cut and that has had, and continues to have, a huge impact.

In Cleveland police, we have lost £40 million from cuts to our budget, and since 2011, we have lost over 500 officers. That is going to have an impact; these cuts have consequences. When I raised that with the Government, they insisted that they are providing extra funding for policing, but that is just not right. In reality, the grant settlement that the Government provided for my local force does not provide a single penny of extra money to allow for a single extra officer to be recruited. For my area, with the 2% pay award, inflation and other cost increases, the settlement means a real-terms cut of £1.6 million, which is equivalent to losing another 50 to 60 officers.

Even worse, local taxpayers are again being asked to put their hands in their pockets through the local precept just to maintain the status quo, so people are paying twice for less of a service than they have previously received. As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) rightly said, this is a regressive tax. There is no reason why my constituents, who, on average, have some of the lowest wages and the highest unemployment in the country, should be paying exactly the same rate as people in the Minister’s constituency.

I am starting to see a very worrying trend regarding private protection, because people are losing such confidence in the police’s ability to support them. Some of my constituents have been driven in desperation to pay for private protection companies to protect their homes and businesses. These companies offer protection packages for around £13 a house that involve offering security, responding to incidents and investigating crimes. I am deeply worried about the legality of such companies and the fact that vulnerable people feel obliged to pay for protection because they have no faith in the law being upheld. It is a damning indictment of the Government’s austerity agenda, under which police funding has been cut back to the extent that my constituents are worried that their local force does not have the resources to keep them safe.

On the Prime Minister’s watch—first as Home Secretary and now as Prime Minister—police budgets have been slashed and crime has shot through the roof. I am afraid that her Government are totally out of touch with the reality on our streets and our estates. The hard work of our dedicated police officers is being undermined by a Government who do not understand the impact of their austerity on our communities. If the cuts do not stop and investment in neighbourhood policing does not start, I fear that people who are desperate to protect their families and communities will take matters into

[Anna Turley]

their own hands—that is what they are telling me word for word. I repeat my call to the Prime Minister and Ministers here today to apologise to my constituents—not just for the cuts, but for asking people to pay again for less of a service—and immediately to give back the money that we need to ensure that there is proper neighbourhood policing for our communities.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. I am afraid that we have to reduce the time limit to five minutes.

7.14 pm

**Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con):** It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), in whose constituency I seem to remember voters recently switched from Labour to Conservative in a local government by-election, which is interesting. She is right that there are many challenges in policing, but there are also lots of positive things happening across many areas of crime and policing.

It is good news that crimes that are traditionally measured by the independent crime survey for England and Wales are down by over a third since June 2010. Interestingly, there has been a 15% decrease in computer-related consumer and retail fraud. I pick that out because it shows that police reform is working in this and many other areas to deal with modern, fast-changing crimes, making families and communities safer as a result. It is an example of our police forces making a difference online, behind closed doors, and of why the effectiveness of the police can no longer be measured simply by the number of bobbies on the beat.

We have protected police spending in real terms to ensure that the police have the resources they need to keep us all safe. We are also clear that the police must continue to reform and look at ways to improve efficiency. However, it is not just funding and efficiency savings that are important for a well run police service. It is also about ensuring that local communities receive a service that meets their local needs. Whether tackling rural crime in the countryside or antisocial behaviour in our town centres, police forces need to respond to local need. That is why we have put local communities in charge of local policing, so that police can do what is right for their areas. Locally elected police and crime commissioners are responsible for writing local policing plans, setting the budget, setting the priorities, and hiring and firing the chief constable.

The ability of PCCs to increase their band D precept by up to £12 next year without the need to call a referendum gives them the flexibility to increase their funding by up to £270 million. Opposition Members talk about funding, as they do for absolutely everything, but I am fairly certain that the capital gains tax that they want to fund their proposals with is paying for all sorts of other promises that we have already heard, so I have yet to hear a genuine alternative. Nor do they seem to grasp that all funding comes from taxpayers, whether local or national, and they fail to mention, for example, the huge reduction in income tax for those same taxpayers under this Government.

In my constituency of Mansfield there are ongoing problems with antisocial behaviour, theft and violent crime, on which we need further support and emphasis. With that in mind, I welcome the fact that Nottinghamshire police will receive a 2.4% cash increase in its direct resource funding in the next financial year and that it is recruiting 200 new officers and bringing back officers in schools, which is an example of good practice. Perhaps Opposition Members should note that the Nottinghamshire police and crime commissioner has welcomed the police settlement and the positive impact that it will have in Nottinghamshire.

As well as protecting budgets, the Government have been proactively responding to the changing nature of criminal offences. I welcome plans to tackle offensive and dangerous weapons by restricting the online sale of knives and banning the sale of acid to under-18s. When the Home Secretary visited Mansfield, she spoke to my local officers about their challenges in addressing antisocial behaviour, particularly among under-18s, and officers asked her perhaps to go away and look at their powers to deal with those issues. I hope she took that away and tried to come up with some appropriate answers.

Crime is changing all the time, and the way that the police respond to it has to change as well. It is good news that £1.9 billion is being invested in the national cyber-security strategy to help to counter the cyber-threats that the UK faces increasingly regularly. The National Crime Agency's budget has also been protected, and new capital investment of over £200 million will be provided to transform the agency into a world-leading law enforcement organisation, with new digital and investigative capability to tackle cyber-crime, child exploitation and the distribution of criminal finances, which is so important in the current international climate.

Protecting women and girls from violence and supporting victims is of the utmost importance. To support the Government's commitment to tackling violence against women and girls, we have pledged £100 million of increased funding to 2020. Of course, forces must also respond to the increased terrorism threat. It is not just London that faces this; with the horrific attack in Manchester last year and counter-terrorism operations taking place across the entire country, it is important that all our police forces build on their counter-terrorism work. I recall that even the Idlewells shopping centre in Sutton in Ashfield was recently evacuated because of a suspicious package, so all forces have to be vigilant.

When it comes to counter-terror funding, the police grant report announced that the counter-terrorism policing budget will go up by 7%, increasing from £707 million to at least £757 million in 2018-19. We are funding a 15% increase in the numbers of intelligence officers, so that we can better respond to terror threats. We have made funding available to train an additional 1,900 intelligence officers at MI5, MI6 and GCHQ. Policing and the policing budget are not simply about how many police officers we have on the ground at any one time. The counter-terrorism strategy is being updated to ensure that the police and security services also have all the powers they need. On a more local level, the Government passed legislation recently to allow police and crime commissioners to look at the powers they give to people in their communities, including PCSOs, and to try to make them more effective locally.

I had much more to say, but I will finish by saying that, as a son of a police officer and coming from a family of police officers, I am incredibly proud of the work that the police do and I fully support the action that the Government are taking.

7.19 pm

**Sir Edward Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley)—not least because I was born in his constituency, although I am a Magpies fan rather than a Stags fan.

It is worth the whole House reflecting on the bravery of our police officers. We saw that bravery a year ago when PC Keith Palmer gave his life protecting this Palace and the people who were around it. Also in our thoughts is Nick Bailey, an officer who went to the help of the Russian people who were poisoned. I am sure that other Members attend local police award ceremonies, and hear about the bravery of policemen and women on a daily basis. Those officers have our support, our thoughts and our thanks.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service talked about the need for a quality debate, and I think that that is important. For instance, I think it important for us to look at the crime figures in detail, which I tried to do in my intervention on the Minister. I welcomed his admission that there are serious crimes—which are better recorded in police recorded crime data and the crime survey—that are going up. In London, we are seeing gun crime go up, knife crime go up, violent crime go up. In my constituency, we are seeing burglaries go up, and in a pretty nasty way. One or two Asian families in Tolworth have been victims of aggravated burglary: people have gone into their homes with weapons and threatened them in order to take gold from them as they sat in their own front rooms. It is quite shocking. It is necessary to focus on crime of that sort, because it is the crime that is going up.

When we talk about the need to invest in the police, we should bear in mind that it is not just about reducing crime, vital though that is, but also about solving crime. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) was right to point out that there are 2.1 million unsolved crimes in Britain today, and the inspectorate says that we are short of 5,000 detectives. When there are so many unsolved crimes and so few detectives to solve them, that sends a very bad signal to the criminals. We can reduce crime if people realise that they will be caught. If the deterrent effect is reduced because criminals do not think they will be caught because of the lack of detectives and the number of unsolved crimes, that sows the seeds for rising crime in the future.

**The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace):** The right hon. Gentleman has made an important point about detective numbers. Just to help him and make sure he understands, let me explain that the shortage of detectives is based on an establishment. It is not that 5,000 have been taken out of the system. There is a problem recruiting people to choose to be detectives as opposed to being in uniform, which is their current preference.

**Sir Edward Davey:** I thank the Minister for that clarification, but my point remains the same, and I am

speaking on behalf of the inspectorate rather than from a party perspective. I hope that he will take on board what I have said.

We also need to think about the part played by the police not just in reducing and solving crime, but in preventing it. The police, and community police, have so many other roles, such as building community relations and filling in the gaps for other services that are not there. It is those functions, which cannot actually be measured, that communities so value. They are now being taken away, and people feel that quite deeply in their communities. If we are to have the serious debate that the police Minister wanted, I hope he will reflect on the other issues that are not always reflected in the figures, but are vital to our recognition of the extent to which the public value the police in the many roles that they undertake.

The crime figures show that the victims of crime are disproportionately the less well off, and disproportionately the more vulnerable. The case for investing in the police is not just about tackling the criminals; it is about social justice. There are issues that go beyond reducing crime, such as looking after the most vulnerable and the least well off in society. I hope that the Minister will take that on board as well.

Let me now say something about resources. I was pleased to hear the police Minister confirm that the number of police officers had fallen significantly. Since May 2015, my constituency has lost more than 50 officers—10% of the local police force—and people have felt the impact of that. Since returning to the House from my unintended leave of absence, and returning to work in my constituency, I have been quite surprised by the inability of the police to respond as quickly as they used to.

We have seen that in the figures on 999 and 101 calls: in London and in many other areas around England, forces are just not able to respond quickly enough, including to very serious calls. That should trouble the Minister. We also see it in severe antisocial behaviour in communities that is just being ignored. As a local Member of Parliament, I have had to get involved with housing associations, the council and the police to make them take notice of serious behaviour that is completely undermining the quality of life of many of my constituents. These are critical issues.

I intervened on the Policing Minister at the beginning of the debate to ask whether he agreed that Sir David Norgrove, chair of the UK Statistics Authority, had said on the record that the Prime Minister was misleading the public in talking about the £450 million increase. I am afraid that the Minister claimed he would deal with the issue in his later remarks, but he did not. We are talking about an important clarification from an independent statistics body about claims made not only by the Prime Minister but in tweets from the Home Office. If we are to have the serious debate that the Minister said he wanted, I hope there will be no more such false claims.

7.26 pm

**Mr Simon Clarke** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak after the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), who touched on important points. I certainly echo her comment about people seeking comfort in the arms of companies that

[*Mr Simon Clarke*]

purport to provide some kind of policing service. That is clearly unacceptable and wrong. If people are feeling the need to do that, that is probably a concern to all of us in the House.

Policing in Cleveland has been a source of lasting controversy throughout my life. That is not a reflection on the rank and file officers; it reflects the corrosive breach of trust between too many senior figures in authority and the public whom they serve. At a time when our force undoubtedly faces real financial pressures—I take on board everything that the hon. Lady said—it sticks in my throat and those of many of my constituents that there have been such enormous pay-offs for officers who have left the force having been grievously wronged.

A short list would include the payment of £457,000 in November 2016 to Nadeem Saddique, a firearms officer subject to racist abuse, and the £185,000 paid in January 2017 to settle cases for four officers, again related to racial discrimination.

**Mike Hill:** Does the hon. Gentleman agree that he is referring to historical cases within Cleveland police? Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary has rated the force as good for the past two years.

**Mr Clarke:** Like everyone, I welcome signs of improvement in the force. I pay tribute to the work of outgoing Chief Constable Iain Spittal and I wish our new Chief Constable Mike Veale every success. However, the truth is that the consequences of these historical allegations continue to damage the force's finances: the most recent pay-out was half a million to Mark Dias, again for bullying and discrimination. More than that, they damage public trust in the force. That ongoing legacy continues to damage the situation in Cleveland today.

In an earlier intervention, I promised that I would come back to the hon. Member for Redcar about the balance of how policing is deployed across Cleveland. There is an issue about how the force allocates resources across our area. The only manned police station in East Cleveland in my constituency is in Guisborough; it is manned by a slender force of a couple of officers and a few police community support officers.

There is real angst in those communities about the fact that the 1,300 officers of Cleveland police are so under-deployed in rural East Cleveland. I am the first to accept that the problems of crime can be less apparent in rural communities, but the truth is that there is a problem of under-reporting of crime in those communities. If there is one message that I want to get out this evening, it is that if my constituents see crime, they should report it to the authorities. I hear from too many people that they simply do not have faith that Cleveland police will follow it up. That is a real concern.

**Anna Turley:** Is the hon. Gentleman saying that he is content that Cleveland police has sufficient resources, and that this is just about deployment, despite the fact that we have lost more than 500 officers and £40 million?

**Mr Clarke:** I fully accept that there are real pressures on the police, but I also believe that the current deployment pattern could be improved upon. That would be a fair reflection of my position.

It is a mark of the concern that exists in East Cleveland that I attended a rally at the Railway Arms pub in Brotton just before Christmas. It was organised by the publican, Graham Cutler, who is a dedicated public servant, and by Barry Hunt, the local Independent councillor. Those are not people who would regard themselves as natural figures to be calling out the police about the service they provide; they are law-abiding individuals who are on the side of the police and who want to see more officers in East Cleveland. My answer to them would be that I am going to raise the matter with our new chief constable, Mike Veale, to see what can be done, and perhaps look at trying to reopen the police station at Loftus, because as my colleagues will know, it is an awfully long way from Loftus to anywhere else in the patch. I hope we can find a way forward that will reflect the fact that, while these are difficult years for the police, there are real challenges for them in my more rural part of Cleveland.

I held a rural forum—the inaugural meeting of my rural club—at the Hunley Hall hotel in Brotton a few weeks ago. It was attended by a group of people who run rural businesses as well as by farmers. It was interesting to hear about the sorts of problems that they are facing. At a lower level, they include endemic theft, problems with cannabis farms hidden in their fields, and offences such as hare coursing, but there are also more serious threats. The farmers were saying that when they challenged people who were creating a nuisance on their land, they had been threatened with physical violence or with their crops and property being burned. I pay tribute to their resilience, but I think this needs to form part of the conversation we have within Cleveland police about how we allocate resource, because these are serious and sinister threats. I was quite shocked by the calm resolve that my constituents showed in the face of these, but they should not have to live with this.

Just yesterday, I presented my ten-minute rule Bill on the problem of drug needles, and I described some experiences in Loftus. I am calling for a change in the law so that we can criminalise those who recklessly or intentionally discarded needles in public places. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Redcar for sponsoring the Bill. This, too, is a matter that I would like to take up with Ministers in due course, because I believe that there is a gap in the law there.

As all of this comes together, my message is that Cleveland is a complex area to police. It is deprived and quite sparsely populated in parts, and, as I have said, historically it has a broken culture that we all want to fix. I believe that there are lessons we can learn to make the best of this challenging situation. I am not going to stand here today and say that all is well in the world of policing in Cleveland, because it is clearly not, but I believe that there are answers that will allow us to offer some comfort to my constituents that we are striking a better balance and achieving a healthier outcome for the communities that we serve.

7.32 pm

**Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this important debate. West Yorkshire police is the fourth largest force in the country and, as I have outlined many times before, it is facing new types of crime as well as old types of crime. However, a 35% reduction in funding since 2010 has resulted in almost 2,000 fewer officers and members of staff, which represents a reduction of 20% of the force.

To give the House a sense of the pressures facing the force, on any one day in West Yorkshire there is one police officer on duty for every 2,097 members of the public. On average, the force will make 136 arrests every day, with a staggering 43 of those related to domestic violence. They will attend 38 house burglaries, 44 thefts from vehicles, 16 thefts of vehicles, four serious violent crimes, seven robberies, 57 assaults, 17 sexual offences and 159 incidents of antisocial behaviour, and deal with 141 incidents of domestic abuse in total. Non-recent child sexual exploitation and abuse investigations now account for 33% of all investigations within West Yorkshire police. A third of all the investigative capacity in the force is dealing with non-recent CSE. There were 184 offences relating to modern-day slavery in 2016, compared with just 19 three years ago.

Firearms will be the main focus of my speech today. There has been a particularly disturbing increase in the discharge of firearms in West Yorkshire over the past two years, with firearms predominantly being used by organised criminal gangs as a means of resolving disputes and of intimidating rivals and innocent members of the public alike. Members will not need me to remind them that it was a firearm that facilitated the murder of our friend and colleague Jo Cox by the right-wing extremist Thomas Mair. Sadly, we are no strangers to extremism in West Yorkshire, with several Prevent priority areas presenting a continuously evolving threat for the Police to assess and manage.

For all the great things about West Yorkshire, the prevalence of extreme ideology and violent and organised crime means that our firearms capabilities are incredibly important. As the shadow Minister said in her exceptional opening speech, the Government announcement in April 2016 that they were setting aside £143 million of funding in order to hire an extra 1,000 armed officers by spring 2018 was welcome and would have reversed the effects of the 1,000 armed officers lost between 2010 and 2016. However, only 650 of those officers have been recruited so far.

I want to ask the Minister specifically about the inter-operability of authorised firearms officers and about variations in the duration and the type of training they receive. With the exception of counter-terrorist specialist firearms officers, who train for much longer, I am aware that the length of training of firearms officers to meet armed response vehicle standards varies between 10 and 12 weeks in different forces, but it is accredited by the College of Policing. However, the requirements for other firearms officers, such as Ministry of Defence police or diplomatic protection officers, are different, and they may train for in the region of four weeks to meet different standards.

If the threat level increases to critical and we deploy Operation Temperer, and all AFOs—authorised firearms officers—with significant variations in training and experience are redeployed all over the country, how do we manage their interoperability? Of the around 6,250 authorised firearms officers in the UK, what proportion are trained to ARV standards and what proportion do not meet that standard? In the event of Operation Temperer being deployed, I fear that some firearms officers could find themselves in situations for which they have not trained. As the uplift is proving slower to deliver than expected, would it not make sense to ensure

that all AFOs are trained to ARV standards to have confidence in that benchmark and in the interoperability of armed officers?

**Mr Wallace:** I would be pleased to answer those specific questions. As for the ARV part of the uplift, we are over and above the original plans, so we are above target and the process is now complete. For the CTSFOs, which is the higher standard—I have been to visit Wakefield, where they do some of their training—the importance of that role is that they have to be so specialised that there is a high failure rate. We must ensure that we maintain standards, but we are on track to fulfil that requirement at the same time.

**Holly Lynch:** I am grateful to the Minister. I am looking to uplift that basic standard, so that all our firearms officers meet a threshold and that we have faith in the basic training.

Finally, the Policing Minister will be well aware—other hon. Members may not be—that we are running into a number of challenges and differences of opinion in relation to the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill or “Protect the Protectors” Bill, which will be back for its Report and Third Reading on 27 April. From my experiences of shadowing the front line and of the brilliant police parliamentary scheme, which I would recommend to all colleagues, I have felt the increased vulnerability that comes when officers are regularly single-crewed; there are simply fewer of them and risks come with that. Over the course of the campaign and the Bill’s journey through Parliament, it has enjoyed cross-party support, as we all share a sense of outrage at seeing emergency service workers spat at, attacked or assaulted.

I have shared horror stories in this Chamber on several occasions about emergency service workers having been spat at and about the anxiety of having to wait for test results, take antiviral treatments as a precaution and, on occasion, adhere to restrictions about interacting with close family and friends based on advice given by medical professionals. The Bill’s purpose is to alleviate those fears for 999 and NHS workers, wherever and however we can, and both my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who has done sterling work leading on the Bill, and I are open to any and all means of getting there. I therefore ask the Policing Minister to continue to engage with us and other MPs to keep that dialogue going between now and 27 April, as we seek to do right by those dedicated emergency service workers, who have high expectations of this Bill, in order to protect them from the vile act of being spat at and the anxiety that follows.

7.39 pm

**Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con):** It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), and I mean that most genuinely. I was in the Chamber when she made her speech on the “Protect the Protectors” Bill, and I thought it was incredibly moving and personal. I completely endorse what she just said and would like to offer her any support that I can.

Many years ago I was a member of the West Midlands police authority. I thought we did a good job of holding the police to account, and I was delighted to sit on the committee that appointed Dave Thompson as deputy chief constable. He proved to be a good appointment, because he is now chief constable.

[Eddie Hughes]

I fully accept that in 2010 both the Liberal Democrat and Conservative manifestos suggested that we needed an alternative form of governance that would allow people to hold an elected official to account for police performance. The following legislation gave us the police and crime commissioners, and perhaps the rest is history. I fully appreciate that, in her opening remarks, the shadow Minister said that police and crime commissioners can only play the hand they have been dealt, but they must surely be accountable for their role.

Unfortunately, my relationship with the Labour police and crime commissioner in the west midlands could best be described as strained. On 23 March 2018, he was directly quoted by the *Express & Star* as saying

“Eddie has been voting for cuts to our force’s budget in parliament”.

That is misleading. Since being elected nine months ago, I have never voted for a cut in police funding. The independent House of Commons Library confirms that my vote in favour of the police funding grant means that total direct resources funding for England and Wales will increase to just over £11.4 billion in 2018-19, up from £11 billion in 2016-17, a cash rise of 2.5%—so no cut there.

Explaining the breakdown of the cash rise, the head of the UK Statistics Authority wrote to the shadow Minister for Policing:

“As the Minister for Policing’s statement outlined, up to £270 million of the funding settlement will come from local council tax”.

As I pointed out earlier, all Government spending comes from tax of one form or another. The letter continued:

“In addition, the Leader of the House of Commons stated that the £270 million that can be raised locally was on top of the...£450 million.”

That is the £450 million the Minister has already announced—so no cut there, either.

However, I am on record as stating at public meetings in my constituency that police funding should increase. Indeed, the police and crime commissioner would have heard me say that in Willenhall on 8 December 2017 if he had bothered to attend the public meeting arranged by the Labour leader of Walsall Council, who also happens to chair the West Midlands police and crime panel. Snow apparently prevented the police and crime commissioner from making the 18-mile journey from his very expensively refurbished office in the centre of Birmingham. Others travelled considerably greater distances to attend the meeting.

Further, in his press release in 2017, the police and crime commissioner asked for an increase of £5 per household on the precept. I voted for an increase of £12 per household, but he still says he does not have enough money. I will continue to fight for more police funding for my constituents and for our hard-working police in Willenhall and Bloxwich, but the good people of my constituency deserve better service from their police and crime commissioner.

7.43 pm

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in today’s debate.

It is clear that the UK Statistics Authority, along with police forces across Wales and England and indeed many members of the public, just does not buy the

Government’s rhetoric that they are providing an extra £450 million in the forthcoming financial year. That is clearly not the case.

After significant campaigning by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), the independent watchdog has now identified that, far from providing extra money, the annual police grant is actually a “flat cash settlement” for police forces across the country, and actually amounts to a cut in direct Whitehall grants to local policing. As a result of my hon. Friend’s work, we now know that Home Office funding for local forces will be cut in real terms.

It seems that the Government’s figures are based on an assumption that an extra £270 million will be raised from local taxes—that money comes from local council tax payers and not from the Government. The Government also included £130 million earmarked for national police priorities that will never be available to local policing.

For my local force, South Wales police, an increase in the precept has been essential to help maintain the service, to allow for the protection of vulnerable people and to continue investment in the future of policing in south Wales. Even with the increase in the 2018-19 precept, South Wales police will still have to cut spending by £3.5 million in the coming year, while tackling significant growth in demand and preventing crime through early intervention and prompt, positive action.

There is added frustration in South Wales because despite repeated calls for a review, the Home Office still does not recognise the extra cost of policing Cardiff, the capital city, so South Wales police is further short-changed, whereas additional money is provided to forces policing London and Edinburgh. Although I represent the Merthyr Tydfil part of the South Wales police area, the pressures of policing the capital city clearly put pressure on resources for my constituency. For example, it cost £5.7 million to police the Champions League final in Cardiff in June last year. On that occasion, one-off grants were made available from the Home Office, the Welsh Government and the Football Association of Wales. However, South Wales police deployed 1,556 officers and spent £2.1 million of its budget.

The Rhymney side of my constituency is policed under Gwent police. Gwent’s police and crime commissioner, Jeff Cuthbert, has joined other PCCs and Sir David Norgrove, the chairman of the UK Statistics Authority, in calling for clarity over the UK Government’s claims. Gwent Police has already seen its budget cut by 40% in real terms since the start of the UK Government’s austerity agenda, leaving the PCC with little choice other than to turn to council tax payers.

All of this is taking place against the backdrop of 21,000 officers lost since austerity began in 2010; more than 18,000 police staff and more than 6,800 police community support officers have been axed, despite a promise to protect the frontline. On a positive note, one of the few areas where PCSOs have been supported is in Wales, where 500 are directly supported by the Welsh Labour Government, helping to ensure visibility of the policing family and mitigate against Tory cuts. We know that this is also taking place against the backdrop of figures showing that crime has risen nationwide by 14%, the highest annual rise since 1992. Violent crime has risen by 20% and robbery has risen by 29%. In many communities I represent, antisocial behaviour

is having a detrimental effect on the quality of life. Public meetings have been called by local communities, and I attended one recently in Abertyswg with the local police, who are doing all that they can with limited resources.

As I said at the start, we know that the “£450 million” is a flat cash settlement for police forces in England and Wales, so we now have the situation where local council tax payers are paying for the Tory cuts imposed from Westminster. I urge the Government to be clear and transparent. I will be fully supporting the motion today, and I urge the Minister to consider it and confirm what action the Government will take to address the concerns.

7.47 pm

**Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con): These past 12 months have served to remind all of us of the challenge facing our police and security services; terror has come to Manchester, London Bridge, Finsbury Park and Parsons Green, and even here to Westminster. These are uncertain times, and the first duty of any Government must be to keep our citizens safe. That is why funding, resources, and capability are all so important, and why I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate.

I must confess, however, that the Labour motion has confused me. Reading it, one could be forgiven for thinking that the Government have completely shunned their responsibility to keep us safe, yet nothing could be further from the truth. For example, in 2017-18, the funding for counter-terrorism stood at £707 million, and earlier this year, the Government announced that that will rise by at least £50 million for 2018-19. That rightly includes a £29 million uplift in armed policing from the police transformation fund. In a year in which we have seen the number of incidents requiring an armed response on the increase, I very much welcome the fact that the Government have taken the decision to bolster our capacity to respond.

I have listed some of the atrocious attacks that we have seen in the UK in the past year. Of course, we must also remember that for every attack that succeeds, countless others have been stopped, with lives saved, often without the public even realising. For that, we owe a debt of gratitude to our security and intelligence agencies. As we would expect, a lot of the data on intelligence budgets is classified. However, we know that the single intelligence account, which funds the security and intelligence services, will increase by 18% in real terms by 2021. The Intelligence and Security Committee has noted that there is a clear, upward trend in funding. The Government take seriously their responsibilities to protect us from harm, and match their rhetoric with resources.

I have largely stayed away from discussing funding for police forces, because funding for policing in Scotland is a devolved issue and is provided by the Scottish Government. Of course, Police Scotland will find itself with around £35 million extra every year thanks to the actions of Scottish Conservative MPs and the UK Conservative Government, who exempted the force from VAT last November. We had a rather theatrical episode earlier, in which Scottish National party and Scottish Labour Members tried to take credit for that, but it was Scottish Conservative MPs, working with a Conservative UK Chancellor, who secured the extra funding. That was despite howls of protest from SNP Members, who

seemed more interested in justifying their decision to make Police Scotland liable in the first place than in working constructively towards a solution.

The additional money will be much needed. Police Scotland has gone from crisis to crisis, and it will take a concerted effort to restore public trust in the force. SNP incompetence has pushed policing in Scotland to the brink. Two chief constables have resigned and several other senior figures have been suspended for a variety of reasons. The SNP's botched British Transport police merger has finally been paused, but I dread to think what the cost has been to the taxpayer.

A recent Audit Scotland report highlighted the failure of the SNP Scottish Government to prepare for welfare powers. All the recommendations could be applied to the SNP's failure to prepare for the merger of BTP into Police Scotland. The report spoke about failures to estimate the full costs and properly resource workforce planning, and a general underestimation of the complexity of the project. I see a similarity between the SNP's failure to prepare for welfare powers and its failure to prepare for British Transport police to be merged into Police Scotland. If Labour Members want to see a police force in crisis, I suggest that they look north of the border and see the mess that the SNP has made of policing in Scotland.

Policing, counter-terrorism and intelligence gathering are too important to get wrong. The Leader of the Opposition has questioned the use of deadly force against terrorists and the SNP has proven itself utterly unfit to lead; only the Conservatives and only this Government have proved themselves capable of delivering the services and the protection that the country needs.

As the Policing Minister rightly highlighted in his opening speech, last week we were reminded of the bravery, professionalism and selflessness of policemen and women, when the House paid tribute to the late PC Palmer. I never tire of expressing my pride at being the husband of a policewoman serving in Scotland, and we will never tire of praising everyone in the emergency services for their courage, effort, professionalism and dedication. Their outstanding work keeps the rest of us safe, and I thank them all.

7.52 pm

**Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in this debate. I congratulate the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), on her excellent contribution.

There is no doubt that this is one of the most important matters facing my constituents, and one that is raised time and again. In fact, the very first issue that I raised in the House after my election in June last year was the effect of police cuts across Merseyside and the urgent need to tackle the rising tide of gun crime following a dramatic increase in shootings across Walton and around Merseyside. All that, against the backdrop of savage cuts to police funding, with £100 million slashed from Merseyside police budgets and the loss of more than 1,000 police officers and more than 200 police community support officers since 2010.

On that day, I saw a Government refusing to face up to the consequences of their cuts. Standing here now, nine months down the line, it feels a bit like groundhog day. Just last week, there was another shooting in Everton in my constituency, leaving a 40-year-old man

[Dan Carden]

in a critical condition. Since last year, the stark reality of police cuts has further unravelled, with shocking figures showing the biggest increase in recorded crime for a decade. In Merseyside, crime is up 14% on the previous year; there has been a 16% rise in violent crime; possession of a weapon is up 22%; robbery is up 29%; and burglary is up by a third. Those figures are borne out by the stories, often tragic, that we see and hear about on an almost daily basis.

During my time in the House, I have heard, time and again, a Prime Minister who refuses to take responsibility. The first responsibility of any Government should be to keep our people safe, but this Government seem to have little regard for the people of Liverpool.

Last week, the Prime Minister was called out by the UK Statistics Authority, which ruled that the public had been misled by the claim of £450 million in extra funding for local forces. What was dressed up as “extra funding” was, in fact, shifting the burden onto local residents through increases in council tax. As always, poorer areas will be left struggling, with far less ability to raise money locally than the better-off areas where crime is often lower. How can that be fair?

In reality, real-terms funding will be cut for the eighth consecutive year, but, more than anything, people would simply like to see the Prime Minister take seriously the impact of police cuts and rising crime on our communities and to take responsibility, because the denials that we have heard from Conservative Members have, quite frankly, been shameful. The Government have consistently denied not only the figures, but the testimony of frontline police officers and chiefs. Merseyside Chief Constable Andy Cooke has warned that cuts have left the force stretched to the limits, and we still have to find a further £18 million more in cuts by 2020.

A recent bid was made to the Home Office for additional funding to be made available to address the specific rise in gun crime—and that was not the first time. Ministers might admit that they raised hopes only to dash them. Andy Cooke has described it thus:

“The police alone cannot tackle gun crime. The causes are deep rooted in society and in order to reduce it requires all relevant agencies to work together and I am fully aware that all those agencies have been subject to draconian budget cuts also.”

I want to pay tribute to Andy and all of his team and to our police officers on the frontline in Merseyside. It saddens me that this Government are content to ignore their calls for help. In fact, this Government treat our frontline workers with contempt. Perhaps we should consider the possibility that frontline staff know their profession better than a party that has, I am afraid, shown disregard for the reality of working people’s lives since it took office.

As well as police cuts, other cuts to public services are clearly contributing to rising crime. Early intervention, outreach programmes, youth centres and the probation service have all fallen victim to the swinging axe of austerity. Labour has promised to begin to reverse years of Tory neglect by putting 10,000 more police officers back on the beat, but we are much more ambitious than that. As in health, so too in crime, prevention is better than cure. A Labour Government will invest in our communities, rebuilding the social fabric that has ruthlessly been stripped away by austerity. By dealing with inequality

and its social consequences, we can tackle the causes of crime at the root, keep our communities safe, and build a more cohesive society based on mutual trust and respect.

**Several hon. Members** rose—

**Mr Speaker:** I am sorry, but in order to accommodate all remaining would-be contributors, the time limit on Back-Bench speeches has now, with immediate effect, to be reduced to four minutes.

7.57 pm

**Kirstene Hair** (Angus) (Con): I pay tribute to the many people who work in counter-terrorism, whose efforts make the United Kingdom a relatively safe place in which to live. The enormity of what they do for us can often go overlooked, because their success is measured by what does not happen rather than by what does. Without their hard work, so many days that have passed relatively peacefully and uneventfully would have turned out very differently for each of us. Therefore, for their tireless efforts against the terrorist threat, they deserve the thanks of the whole House and, indeed, the whole country.

I am glad to support a UK Government who take the terrorist threat to our country seriously, and who fund counter-terrorism efforts accordingly. I pay particular tribute to the decision in January to increase the counter-terrorism policing budget by £50 million to £757 million. Compare this £757 million that the Conservatives are putting towards counter-terror policing now with the £552 million that Labour put towards it in its last year in office—even at a time when it was content to run a deficit of £154 billion—and it is not hard to tell which party is truly committed to properly funding counter-terrorism. However, counter-terrorism is not just a matter for the police. Our intelligence services—MI5, MI6 and GCHQ—play a vital role in countering terrorism and in helping build a safer Britain and a safer world. The single intelligence account, which funds those crucial services, has also seen its budget increase. All in all, the UK Government are working hard to meet their commitment to increase counter-terrorism spending by 30% over the five years to 2020, reaching an ultimate total of £5.1 billion. This is how we address the threats to this country at a time when the nature of terrorism is changing dramatically.

Funding is important, but an effective counter-terror strategy needs more than funding. It needs an approach that recognises and reflects the fact that terrorists who threaten us now operate on a different basis from those who did so 10, 20 or 30 years ago. Thanks in part to the rise of the internet, terrorist groups increasingly work on a looser, more globalised basis, and an increasing proportion of the threat comes from so-called lone wolves.

It is right that our counter-terrorism efforts are changing as the nature of the threat changes, and we must always be sure to remain one step ahead of the terrorists. In many ways, terrorists have had to change the way in which they operate precisely because the hard work of our police, intelligence services and others has succeeded in making it impossible for them to operate as they used to. We must keep up the pressure and keep stamping out new threats as they emerge.

Yes, we must fund counter-terrorism policing and the intelligence services properly, and I am pleased that this Conservative Government are doing just that, but counter-terrorism involves more than that. It involves keeping our armed forces well-funded, with defence spending above 2% of GDP; being willing to use our armed forces and to work with our allies to take on international terror; and countering extremism and radicalisation here in Britain, through initiatives such as the vital Prevent strategy, for which Labour and SNP support was lukewarm at best. But when we compare this Government's record against that of Corbyn, Labour and the SNP, there is only one conclusion: only the Conservatives can be trusted to work on all levels to support our counter-terrorism efforts and keep this country safe.

8.1 pm

**Sarah Jones** (Croydon Central) (Lab): During the election campaign I met a 20-year-old young man called Kelva Smith. He was in a front garden with a group of friends, and they had a chat with me as I was canvassing. We talked about crime, the lack of youth services, funding cuts and all the issues that young people are facing. If I am honest, Kelva and his friends were pretty pessimistic about my ability to do anything about any of these problems. On 5 March this year, Kelva was stabbed to death on the streets of Croydon. It turns out that Kelva and his friends were right to be pessimistic. I did not manage to change the situation for young people in Croydon. And now Kelva is dead and it is too late for him. I do not want us to fail another person, which is why I set up the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime, why I am campaigning—along with so many colleagues across the political divide—for action on serious youth violence, and why I am working with every organisation I possibly can.

Our police are under pressure like never before in the face of knife crime and youth violence. In London, 80 people were stabbed to death last year. We saw eight deaths in a week of knife crime and gun crime just a couple of weeks ago, and the majority of cases are young people. Twenty-six people have been shot or stabbed to death in our capital so far this year—roughly one person every three days. This problem is not unique to London by any stretch. Knife crime across England and Wales grew by 21% last year, and almost all police forces are seeing an increase. There were 37,000 knife offences last year. Many MPs have joined the all-party parliamentary group, and are coming up to me quite regularly having realised that knife crime is a problem in their area. Knife-carrying in schools has rocketed, increasing by 42% over two years. The age of those carrying knives is also getting younger—some are 10, 11, 12 and 13 years old.

I sit on the Select Committee on Home Affairs, which is doing an inquiry into the changing nature of policing. I understand the pressures that the police are under and the changing nature of crime. I also understand the need for efficiencies. It is quite insulting, I would suggest, to say that Labour Members do not believe in efficiencies. Of course we do—nobody wants to waste taxpayers' money—but there is only so much one can do with efficiencies in the situation where the Met police have already made £600 million of savings and have to make another £400 million, where all but one of the police stations in Croydon has been closed, where our borough

commander now has to lead three boroughs rather than one, and where eight out of 10 of our neighbourhood police officers have now gone.

Last week, I was in a secondary school where I talked to school-based police officers who were doing extraordinary work in helping people with issues of domestic violence and helping with children who went missing. Those police officers had built relationships with young people that meant that those young people trusted them. However, school-based police officers have been cut by 20% since 2010, and 13 police forces have no officers in schools at all.

I want to end with a basic plea: we need more funding so that we can have more police. It is a very simple situation. We are not trying to spin the facts. We need more police. It is too late for Kelva but it is not too late for other people.

8.5 pm

**Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): It is an honour to follow in the footsteps of my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), because I will be speaking about knife crime as well.

Many Members of this House will have seen the young people in Washington speak last week very movingly and eloquently about losing their friends in shootings. Many of us saw the tens of thousands of young people marching on Capitol Hill in Washington. For me, as I listened to the youngsters speak and watched them marching, it felt dangerously close to home, because just two days before what happened in Washington, I went to a march in my own area—the Camden march against violence. This was co-organised by my constituent Elaine Donnellon, who had decided that people had to do something to protest, and also to find out the causes of the knife crime in Camden over the past few years. The victims are young men and boys who constantly get knifed and die, mostly members of the black community.

The testimony of the mother I spoke to who had lost her sons was unbelievable. The words of comfort that I gave to her felt inadequate when she had lost son after son through knife crime in Camden. The recent knife violence in London, which my hon. Friend articulated so well, has pushed many of our communities into despair. Those are the people I want to speak up on behalf of today. I want to speak for the elderly who now carry personal alarms because they are so scared to go out into the street. I want to speak for the parents who say goodbye to their children when they go off to school and are not sure if they are going to return home after school ends. Most of all, I want my speech to be a rallying cry for the young people who died after suffering from knife crime and cannot speak for themselves.

There are some damning statistics that I want to share with the House. Since January, London has seen double the number of fatal stabbings compared with the same period last year. Since 14 March alone, five people have been stabbed to death in our city. Many more are still fighting for their lives in hospital. Half the victims are aged 23 or younger. Any of the families who were on the march and who have suffered loss and those who have lost friends will say the same thing over and again—that knife violence does not exist in a vacuum. The banner at the front of the silent march that I attended had one message: "Stop the Violence. Invest in our Youth."

[Tulip Siddiq]

The huge cuts to the Government's preventive services have put even more pressure on the police and our communities. Overall, there has been a 44% youth service budget cut, which means that across 25 councils with like-for-like data, 81 youth centres and major council-supported youth projects have been cut. The situation we are facing is being exacerbated further and further by cuts to youth services. I am sorry if this is uncomfortable for some, but frankly, having attended that march led, as I say, by a mother who suffered three—yes, three—sons dying in the space of six months, I am in no mood to temper my words.

There are now fewer officers on our streets than in 2010. For the first time in a decade, the number of crimes recorded annually has passed the 5 million mark, rising by 13%. I do not have time to go through all the statistics. However, the cutting of police numbers and the lack of investment in services that offer a safety net to all the young men in my constituency is an obvious part of this very real problem, and to say otherwise is to allow policymakers simply to wash their hands of it.

8.9 pm

**Jo Platt** (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to speak in this vital debate and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq).

Police forces across the country have borne the brunt of this Government's austerity cuts over the past eight years, and my constituency is no stranger to the shrinking blue line. Since 2010, Greater Manchester has seen 2,000 fewer police officers on the streets. The Government do not need to hear that from me; they can just look at our local crime statistics or listen to the people whose lives have been affected by the ever increasing cuts to our police force.

Despite promises of protection for our police budgets, the police grant has been reduced by £8 million. When I confronted the Home Secretary with those uncomfortable truths a few weeks ago, she insisted that the real problem was the amount of reserves that our Greater Manchester Mayor, Andy Burnham, was sitting on. I would like to take this opportunity to confront that point head on.

The level of general reserves in Greater Manchester stands well within the advised range, with the rest earmarked for important projects to reduce demand on police services, such as mental health triage, crime prevention and victim support. There is no magic money pot that our Mayor is sitting on. Instead, we are seeing the same story here as we did in the local government debate earlier, of blaming the police service for the Government's failure to resource vital public services that our communities rely on.

Reserves have also been used effectively to roll out innovative ways of working, and one such approach has been rolled out in my area. Greater Manchester police has launched a place-based working scheme that has proved to have enormous potential. However, the scale of the cutbacks on police community support officers and neighbourhood beat officers is so crippling that the scheme is struggling to remain operational. In places with high levels of antisocial behaviour, drug and alcohol use and other social problems, associated issues have been successfully reduced, but time and again I hear stories of officers who are designated to that scheme

then moved to fill operational gaps across the police force. If our police forces were given investment in those schemes in the form of neighbourhood policing, we may not only see long-term crime reduction but would increase confidence in our police forces and communities while reducing the strain on other public services.

After years of crippling cuts, our police forces are crying out for the funding that they need to keep our communities safe. Labour's message is clear: we cannot protect our communities on the cheap. Now is the time to invest in our local forces, end the pay cap and give our brave police officers the pay rise they deserve.

8.12 pm

**Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt), and I would like to congratulate our shadow team on securing this important debate.

It is very clear that we cannot keep the public safe on the cheap. The announcement of extra funding to combat crime and terror in December actually amounts to a real-terms cut in central funding for police forces of £324 million this year. The Government have ignored the police by offering far less than they need and insulted the public by expecting them to pay for it. The legacy of the Government's cuts means that there are now fewer officers per head than at any time on record, as crime, including violent crime, rockets.

Between April 2016 and September 2017, Bedfordshire experienced a 12.2% increase in crime, a 24% increase in the number of calls requiring an immediate response and a 48.9% increase in burglary, compared with the same period in the previous year. The police have had to try to deal with that on a reduced budget, with a reduced workforce.

Bedfordshire police force is one of the smallest in Britain, but it covers Luton airport as well as the town, which carries an unusually high level of serious threats that are not normally dealt with by a force of that size. Some 40% of the force's activity takes place in Luton. While there is insufficient police capacity to deal with the challenges in that town, it means that the rest of Bedfordshire has less than its proportionate share of police cover, for which its residents also pay.

Constituents in Bedford will not forget the words of Bedfordshire police chief constable Jon Butcher, who said six months ago that the police did not have the resources to keep residents safe and that officers could not cope with the demand. In an interview published in *The Daily Telegraph*, he said:

"My officers cannot cope with the demand and no-one seems to be listening... Things cannot go on as they are. My officers are exhausted."

He also said that he does not have the numbers to attend 999 calls, and it cannot get worse than that.

In an Adjournment debate on police funding in Bedfordshire led by the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) in November, the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service said that public safety is the Government's No. 1 priority, and that his Government of course have a responsibility to make sure the police have the resources they need. May I remind the Minister that Bedfordshire has the third highest terror risk in the country? Yet the extra funding for counter-terrorism is nowhere near what police commissioners have asked for, and it is not effective

without enough officers on the frontline to provide intelligence. The counter-terrorism police are under such a strain that some terror cases are not being investigated, and the number of serious crimes left unsolved or not investigated at all is at a record high. We are living in different times with different threats. The spate of terror attacks in the UK and Europe is a shift, not a spike, in the threat level, and it could take a generation to eliminate that. This new normality needs a robust response, and police forces need the resources and the funding to do their jobs properly.

8.16 pm

**Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab): My constituency of High Peak is in Derbyshire, where our police support grant has been cut by over 26% in real terms since 2010. For that reason, we have 411 fewer police officers, down from 2,066, which is a cut of over a fifth. The reserves have halved, and there is a flat-rate settlement for Derbyshire this year. Out of that flat-rate settlement, our police force needs to fund the police pay rise—and don't our police officers deserve a pay rise! The pay rise is only 2%, which is below the rate of inflation, but it still needs to be found out of a flat-cash settlement, which will cut into other resources and cut even further into the reserves.

In my area, our police now cover an area of 25 miles by 25 miles from just two police stations. They are stretched as thin as they could possibly be stretched. I recently spent a 12-hour shift on a Friday night with our local police force to see their reaction to and how they cope with the pressures on them. They are incredibly resilient officers, and I pay tribute to every one of them. They are out driving huge distances, and they often have to respond to domestic violence and antisocial behaviour on their own.

The police no longer have enough officers to double up. They try their very best to do so, but I was told that, when responding to youngsters who are threatening them, they have to claim that they have back-up on the way and just around the corner, while knowing that that is not the case and that their colleagues are often much further away, which makes them all worried for their own safety. None of our police officers should have to put themselves on the line in that way. That is why the cuts to our police service are wrong, and why Labour Members are fighting for our police.

The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham), who is no longer in her place, talked about the police and crime commissioner for Derbyshire and claimed that he did not have a plan for local policing, but I actually have a copy of it here. Our police and crime commissioners do the best job they can with what they have. They are dealing with a huge increase in cyber-crime, terrorism, human trafficking and child sexual exploitation, which are all hugely costly in police time.

Our residents are suffering as well. The hon. Lady criticised our police and crime commissioner for going to visit villages where there is concern about crime, and giving them information about crime prevention and how to keep themselves safe. Surely going to see people in exposed rural areas is what our police and crime commissioners should be doing up and down the country. They absolutely need the support of the police and their police and crime commissioner, who should make sure that they use our policing resources as best they can.

I recently spent three hours on a Saturday afternoon with local police community support officers at a drop-in for local people to make sure that there was enough crime prevention advice and that local people felt safe. Even in beautiful rural areas such as mine in the Peak district, people are starting to feel that they cannot go outside their homes because they are scared. That is what this Government have done through their cuts to our police forces, and that is what we need to prevent.

8.20 pm

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate to highlight the urgent financial pressures facing our police forces. As the motion says,

“central government funding to local police forces will fall in real terms for the eighth consecutive year in 2018-19”;

there will be a

“shortfall in funding for counter-terrorism policing”;

and police numbers are at their lowest for decades, damaging community safety.

I too pay tribute to my local police force, Gwent police. I know what an incredibly hard job they do on the frontline, and that they are doing all they can to adapt and rise to the new challenges under incredible financial strain. I was incredibly pleased to see a recent report by the inspector of constabulary and fire and rescue services that showed that Gwent has the highest estimated spending on neighbourhood policing of all 43 forces.

As other Members have said, the Government have to be clear with the public on the police budget. That point has been echoed by the Gwent PCC, Jeff Cuthbert. The Prime Minister told the House that she was

“not just protecting police budgets, but increasing them with an extra £450 million.”—[*Official Report*, 7 February 2018; Vol. 635, c. 1485.]

I hear today that the figure is £460 million. However, she left out the fact that, due to cuts, the additional money comes from raising taxes on local residents. That is what police and crime commissioners have been forced to do. In reality, the decision to continue the cash freeze on the funding for police forces amounts to a real-terms cut of at least £100 million.

Locally, Gwent has seen its budget cut by 40% in real terms since 2010. That has meant the loss of about 350 frontline officers and 200 members of staff. The force is recruiting again. Indeed, I was pleased to join my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) at a passing out parade just a few weeks ago. However, that has been possible only thanks to the force's effective financial management, efficiency savings and annual increases in the local precept to maintain a flat-line budget. That budget will enable Gwent to maintain and protect its number of offices, but not to increase it substantially.

Policing is obviously not devolved, but the Welsh Government have stepped up to the mark and funded 101 PCSOs for Gwent. Without that, we would have about 30. That is welcome obviously and yet another reason to be glad to have a Welsh Labour Government in Cardiff. However, we should not hide from the wider funding problem, which is clearly in the Government's hands.

[Jessica Morden]

This is a debate about money and resources, but what matters to my constituents is the human cost. The statistics show clearly that crime is increasing at the same time as central Government funding is shrinking. As our PCC said, the inevitable conclusion is that policing is under-resourced to deal with an escalating problem. We must bear in mind that cuts to other services have an impact on the police, who are often the backstop service. There are fewer resources to deal not only with proactive crime prevention, but with new types of complex crime such as cyber-crime and the demands of counter-terrorism. That makes the Government's refusal to invest in our police forces indefensible. I hope that the Government reflect on this debate and urgently review their strategy on police funding.

8.23 pm

**Fiona Onasanya** (Peterborough) (Lab): I thank and pay tribute to the police force in my constituency of Peterborough, because it is doing a fantastic job with limited resources. I have explained to the superintendent that the implementation of the cuts is much like tying their hands behind their back and asking them to catch. Of the forces in England, Cambridgeshire constabulary ranks sixth from bottom, at 33rd out of 39, for the amount of funding per person it receives. The forces in most need get the least and local residents pay the price for the cuts.

In my Peterborough constituency, 16,727 crimes were recorded in the last 12 months. That figure is up by 17%. Surely the Government can see that the cuts are hurting and not working. Less is not more. We need officers to keep our communities safe, yet in the same period there has been a real-terms reduction of £1.2 million in Home Office funding to my local force. Despite a promise to protect the frontline, since 2010 the Cambridgeshire constabulary has lost over 139 police officers, while 83 community support officers have been axed. The public are sick and tired of cuts: cuts to local children's services; cuts to local authorities; and cuts to local policing. Cutting rather than protecting those who protect us is not working.

The chair of the National Police Chiefs' Council said:

"Relying on local taxpayers while slashing funding from Westminster will mean tough choices about priorities for many local forces."

The question I would like to put to the Minister as I close is this: what will it take for this Government to realise the futility of knowing the price of everything yet the value of nothing?

8.25 pm

**Ms Diane Abbott** (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I listened with interest to the Minister who introduced the debate and to the speeches from Conservative Members. Members on the Labour Benches were told that we do not understand the complexity of the issues. We were told that we do not care about efficiency. We were told that we are looking backward. Above all, the Minister said we were waving shrouds.

Let me explain to the Minister that I have represented one of the high-crime areas of our great cities for 30 years. None of us wants to make these speeches

about the effect of crime in our communities, and yes, Minister, violent crime is going up: knife crime, gun crime, acid attacks, the county lines system of drug distribution. But crime is not just brutal for the victims of crime—it is brutal to whole communities: mothers who see their young sons disappear down a vortex of violence and crime, and wonder, when they go out, if they will return. We are not waving shrouds: we are talking about the reality of life as it is lived by the people we live among and seek to represent.

I want to say a few words about reserves, which Ministers sometimes bring up as the answer to money problems in police funding. They know full well that most of the reserves they refer to are earmarked or allocated reserves. The funds they refer to have overwhelmingly been allocated for specific purposes. These reserves are just not available for day-to-day funding. Just as important, they should not be used for day-to-day funding. Ongoing and recurring costs should not be met from the finite stock of reserves. That is the way to losses, to deficits, to crises—the types of issues, deficits and crises this Government have created elsewhere in the public sector, most damagingly in the NHS. The reserves are needed, and it would not be prudent or even lawful to run them down to zero.

On precepts, I do not want to remind Ministers of their reprimand by the chair of the UK Statistics Authority, but it is simply not the case that they can include money from the council tax precept and treat it or talk about it as if it is direct funding from Government. It is not. It is simply not clear to Labour Members why Conservative Members persist in using that line when the Prime Minister has already been reprimanded by the UK Statistics Authority. Let me remind Ministers of the Home Office press release in December 2017. The headline was "Police funding increases by £450 million in 2018", but the chair of the UK Statistics Authority, questioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), said:

"the Prime Minister's statement and the Home Office's tweet could have led the public to conclude incorrectly that central government is providing an additional £450 million for police spending".

He went on to suggest that the Home Office head of statistics made sure that his colleague statisticians understood the structure of police funding and the importance of making clear public statements. I hope that the Minister will assure me that this has happened.

**Dan Carden:** One criticism that Ministers have made is that we have focused our remarks on resources, but are chief constables themselves not telling us that they need resources? The key example is gun crime in Liverpool. Merseyside police have the experience and the expertise, but they need the resources.

**Ms Abbott:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I will come to what chief constables all over the country are saying later in my speech. In his statement on police funding on 31 January, the Minister stated:

"In 2018-19, we will provide each police and crime commissioner (PCC) with the same amount of core Government grant funding as in 2017-18."—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 25WS.]

He said "the same amount", but it is a freeze in direct Government funding. When inflation is close to 3%, it amounts to a cut in real terms, because the flat-cash

settlement does not cover the unfunded pay rise, pension costs, the apprenticeship levy and rising fuel costs. To say blithely that it is the same amount, as though it is not actually a cut in real terms, is quite disappointing.

I want to say a few words on counter-terrorism and to make the point that Ministers sometimes do not want to talk about—that counter-terrorism and community policing are inextricably linked. As somebody reminded us earlier, it was Sadiq Khan who said:

“For every £1 of counter terrorism funding spent in response to an incident, around £2 is spent on necessary additional non-counter terrorism activity, which has to come from wider policing budgets.”

Community policemen and women are on the frontline of counter-terrorism, so to talk about narrowly defined counter-terrorism funding and not understand that community policing on the ground is the frontline of counter-terrorism is, again, disappointing.

The effects of these cuts on the ground have been set out by my colleagues my hon. Friends the Members for High Peak (Ruth George), for Redcar (Anna Turley) and for Halifax (Holly Lynch), the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), and my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq)—who made a very moving speech—for Leigh (Jo Platt), for Newport East (Jessica Morden) and for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya). They talked from personal experience, but in closing, let me remind Ministers what senior officers have said.

The assistant chief constable from Northumbria, Ged Noble, recently told the police and crime panel that total crime in his area had risen by 109% since 2014 and violent crime was up by over 200%. The Bedfordshire chief constable said:

“We do not have the resources to keep residents safe.”

**Ruth George:** Does my right hon. Friend not feel it is a sign of the significance that the Government attach to our brave police officers and the victims of crime all over this country that the Home Secretary has not even been present at any point during this important debate?

**Ms Abbott:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It will have been observed by the community and by policemen and women that the Home Secretary was not in this debate at any point.

I was talking about what senior officers have said. The Bedfordshire chief constable, Jon Boutcher, said:

“My officers cannot cope with the demand and no-one seems to be listening.”

The Minister quoted Cressida Dick, so let me give him another quote:

“We’ve got emergency calls going up, we’ve got crime going up nationally and in London...Police chiefs will do all they can to protect the public from terrorism. We will make choices about what we prioritise and where we invest. Some of these choices may be difficult and unpalatable to the public”.

The National Police Chiefs’ Council criticised the Government’s funding settlement for

“failing to fully meet the level of investment identified.”

But perhaps the most damning verdict is from Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary, which said in its recent report:

“About a quarter of forces are all too often overwhelmed by the demand they face, resulting in worrying backlogs of emergency jobs”.

The picture is clear. Despite Tory bluster, the police are overstretched, they are attempting to deal with more crime and more complex crime, and this Government are providing them with fewer resources in real terms to do that. We heard tonight about some of our poorest communities feeling the need to pay for private protection. We saw in the constabulary report that policemen and women are responding to 999 calls the next day. That is happening on this Government’s watch. Instead of accusing us of shroud waving, they should address the real concerns among policemen and women and in communities about this Government’s failure to fund policing properly.

8.35 pm

**The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace):** In the short time left to me, I shall try to answer many of the valid, important and heartfelt points that colleagues from across the House have made about police funding. This is an important debate. We all value our police and we all wish we had more money to spend on policing and the rest of public services across the United Kingdom, but of course we have to live in an economic climate in which we are paying off the debt and trying to live within our means. [*Interruption.*] Opposition Members might not like it, but we spend £87,000 a minute servicing the interest on our national debt. That is three police officers’ salaries every minute of the day, but for which we get nothing back.

That is the legacy of the Labour party, and that is why I was as angry as the shadow Home Secretary, because the impact of that type of debt always falls on the poorest in society. The debt that a Government rack up is always paid for by the vulnerable and the poor, whatever the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) says. Like the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), I have been in this House long enough to see different Governments tackle the problem of crime. As a Member of this House for 30 years, under Labour and Conservative Governments, the right hon. Lady will have seen crime go up and down and the police under pressure, no matter how much budgets are sometimes forced to change.

**Mr Sweeney rose—**

**Mr Wallace:** I do not have time to give way.

We heard a number of contributions in the debate. The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) gave the usual off-the-shelf SNP answer, which is that, despite all the powers that we have given the Scottish Parliament, including tax-raising powers, and the above-average spending, England should pay. Somehow that is the SNP’s solution to everything, rather than facing up to the issues.

My hon. Friends the Members for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) and for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) pointed out that part of this debate has to be about recognising whether PCCs are delivering on their freedoms to help to shape policing in their communities. Some are and some are not, irrespective of their parties. The best example that I can give of the power of good leadership is Durham constabulary, Chief Constable Mike Barton

[Mr Wallace]

and a Labour PCC delivering a force graded as outstanding in England, despite pressure on their budgets and on policing. Their leadership—[*Interruption.*] “Government cuts”—I love it. It is the old mantra. Labour runs up the debt, we have to fix the economy—and unfortunately ordinary people pay.

The hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) made an important point. I am sure he will be pleased to know that we have increased capital funding in south Wales to establish a joint counter-terrorism unit and the regional organised crime unit, as well as in Gwent, to make sure that we are attacking the threat collectively and strongly.

My hon. Friends the Members for Moray (Douglas Ross) and for Angus (Kirstene Hair) made a strong point about counter-terrorism policing, because Labour is incorrect, even at the heart of today’s motion, about the £54 million shortfall in funding for counter-terrorism. If the Opposition are going to put something like that at the heart of their motion, one might think they might get it right. All the money that the police asked for to respond to operational pressures from counter-terrorism was given. They did not ask for £54 million; they did not get. Before Labour Members put that in their motion, I would recommend they seek some accuracy.

**Louise Haigh:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Wallace:** No, I will not. I have a second to finish and the hon. Lady has had her say.

The hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) gave a valid and thoughtful speech. The challenges in West Yorkshire are almost unique—that is why it is a Prevent priority area—with serious organised crime and inter-community threats to each other and, indeed, the state. That is why we have increased counter-terrorism across a broad front, not just in local, specialist policing. We have used the full weight of Government, with Prevent, intelligence officers and GCHQ, as well as the regional organised crime units and the National Crime Agency, to ensure that we meet the threat. What was said by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton was inaccurate. There were no swingeing cuts. The bodies that we are using to tackle gun crime—the NCA, GCHQ and the ROCUs—have not been subject to draconian cuts as he claimed, and we are starting to produce some results.

Ultimately, this is a situation that we would not have wished for. However, we have to deal with what we inherited from a Labour Government who were unable to manage the economy, and in the end it is always the public who pay for economic mismanagement. The police are not alone, and my constituents are not alone. No one in the House will be fooled by the leader of the Labour party, who, when I was patrolling the streets with the police in the 1990s, was supporting, voting and fraternising with some of the worst terrorists in the United Kingdom. We will not forget the Leader of the Opposition, and we will not forget what they tried to do to our police and this country.

**Mr Nicholas Brown** (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I beg to move that the question be now put.

**Mr Speaker:** The point of order is not required. I think the Minister has concluded his speech, so we will go straight to the vote.

**Mr Brown:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. It would nevertheless be possible for someone else to rise.

**Mr Speaker:** It would, but it would equally possible for me not to see that person. None the less, I think that the right hon. Gentleman is going to achieve his objective perfectly properly in procedural terms, and I thank him for what he has said.

*Question put.*

*The House divided: Ayes 203, Noes 0.*

**Division No. 135]**

**[8.41 pm**

**AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	Ellman, Mrs Louise
Alexander, Heidi	Elmore, Chris
Ali, Rushanara	Esterson, Bill
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Evans, Chris
Amesbury, Mike	Farrelly, Paul
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Field, rh Frank
Ashworth, Jonathan	Fitzpatrick, Jim
Barron, rh Sir Kevin	Fletcher, Colleen
Beckett, rh Margaret	Fovargue, Yvonne
Benn, rh Hilary	Foxcroft, Vicky
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Furniss, Gill
Brown, Lyn	Gaffney, Hugh
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	George, Ruth
Bryant, Chris	Gill, Preet Kaur
Buck, Ms Karen	Glindon, Mary
Burden, Richard	Green, Kate
Burgon, Richard	Greenwood, Margaret
Byrne, rh Liam	Griffith, Nia
Cadbury, Ruth	Grogan, John
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Gwynne, Andrew
Carden, Dan	Haigh, Louise
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Hamilton, Fabian
Charalambous, Bambos	Hanson, rh David
Coaker, Vernon	Hardy, Emma
Cooper, Julie	Harris, Carolyn
Cooper, rh Yvette	Hayes, Helen
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Healey, rh John
Coyle, Neil	Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Crausby, Sir David	Hill, Mike
Creagh, Mary	Hobhouse, Wera
Creasy, Stella	Howarth, rh Mr George
Cruddas, Jon	Huq, Dr Rupa
Cummins, Judith	Jardine, Christine
Cunningham, Alex	Jarvis, Dan
Cunningham, Mr Jim	Johnson, Diana
Dakin, Nic	Jones, Darren
Davey, rh Sir Edward	Jones, Gerald
David, Wayne	Jones, Mr Kevan
Davies, Geraint	Jones, Sarah
De Cordova, Marsha	Jones, Susan Elan
Dent Coad, Emma	Kane, Mike
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Keeley, Barbara
Dodds, Anneliese	Khan, Afzal
Doughty, Stephen	Killan, Ged
Dowd, Peter	Kinnock, Stephen
Drew, Dr David	Kyle, Peter
Duffield, Rosie	Laird, Lesley
Eagle, Ms Angela	Lake, Ben
Eagle, Maria	Lavery, Ian
Edwards, Jonathan	Lee, Karen
Efford, Clive	Leslie, Mr Chris

Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
 Lloyd, Stephen  
 Lloyd, Tony  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 Lucas, Ian C.  
 Lynch, Holly  
 Madders, Justin  
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid  
 Mahmood, Shabana  
 Malhotra, Seema  
 Mann, John  
 Marsden, Gordon  
 Martin, Sandy  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Matheson, Christian  
 McCabe, Steve  
 McCarthy, Kerry  
 McDonagh, Siobhain  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonnell, rh John  
 McGinn, Conor  
 McGovern, Alison  
 McInnes, Liz  
 McMahan, Jim  
 Mearns, Ian  
 Miliband, rh Edward  
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine  
 Moran, Layla  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Morgan, Stephen  
 Morris, Grahame  
 Murray, Ian  
 Nandy, Lisa  
 Norris, Alex  
 Onasanya, Fiona  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Osamor, Kate  
 Owen, Albert  
 Peacock, Stephanie  
 Pennycook, Matthew  
 Perkins, Toby  
 Phillips, Jess  
 Phillipson, Bridget  
 Pidcock, Laura  
 Platt, Jo  
 Pollard, Luke  
 Pound, Stephen  
 Powell, Lucy  
 Qureshi, Yasmin  
 Rayner, Angela  
 Reed, Mr Steve  
 Rees, Christina

Reeves, Ellie  
 Reeves, Rachel  
 Reynolds, Emma  
 Reynolds, Jonathan  
 Rodda, Matt  
 Rowley, Danielle  
 Ruane, Chris  
 Ryan, rh Joan  
 Saville Roberts, Liz  
 Shah, Naz  
 Sharma, Mr Virendra  
 Sheerman, Mr Barry  
 Sherriff, Paula  
 Shuker, Mr Gavin  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Skinner, Mr Dennis  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Smeeth, Ruth  
 Smith, Angela  
 Smith, Cat  
 Smith, Eleanor  
 Smith, Laura  
 Smith, Nick  
 Snell, Gareth  
 Sobel, Alex  
 Spellar, rh John  
 Starmer, rh Keir  
 Stevens, Jo  
 Streeting, Wes  
 Tami, Mark  
 Thomas, Gareth  
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick  
 Thornberry, rh Emily  
 Timms, rh Stephen  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Turley, Anna  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Twigg, Stephen  
 Twist, Liz  
 Vaz, Valerie  
 Walker, Thelma  
 Western, Matt  
 Whitehead, Dr Alan  
 Williamson, Chris  
 Wilson, Phil  
 Woodcock, John  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
 Jeff Smith and  
 Thangam Debbonaire

#### NOES

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
 Martin Whitfield and

**Mr Paul Sweeney**

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House asserts that the loss of 21,000 police officers, 18,000 police staff and 6,800 police community support officers since 2010 in addition to the reduction in the number of armed officers has damaged community safety and public security; is concerned that central government funding to local police forces will fall in real terms for the eighth consecutive year in 2018-19 and in addition that there will be a £54m shortfall in funding for counter-terror policing; notes with alarm the assessment of the National Police Chiefs Council that this will mean tough choices for policing in the year ahead; supports the conclusion of the UK Statistics Authority that the Prime Minister could have led the

public to conclude incorrectly that the Government were providing an additional £450m for police spending in 2018-19; and calls on the Government to take steps to increase officer numbers by 10,000 and to fulfil the full counter-terrorism policing requirements laid out by police chiefs for the year ahead and to report to the House by Oral Statement and written report before 19 April 2018 on what steps it is taking to comply with this resolution.

#### PETITIONS

##### Royal Bank of Scotland closure in Mallaig

8.53 pm

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I remind the House that, in 2008, the people of the United Kingdom bailed out the Royal Bank of Scotland to the tune of £45 billion. We own the Royal Bank of Scotland collectively throughout this country. Just before the turn of last year, the Royal Bank of Scotland announced that it was closing 62 branches up and down Scotland, with many rural communities losing the last bank in town. One of the affected communities is Mallaig, in the constituency of Ross, Skye and Lochaber. The town of Mallaig is an hour's drive away from the next nearest Royal Bank of Scotland. The bank is turning its back on its customers who reside in that part of the country.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Ross, Skye and Lochaber,

Declares that proposed closure of the following branches of the publicly-owned Royal Bank of Scotland in the areas of Kyle of Lochalsh, Beaulay and Mallaig, will have a detrimental effect on local communities and the local economy.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Her Majesty's Treasury, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Royal Bank of Scotland to take into account the concerns of petitioners and take whatever steps they can to halt the planned closure of these branches.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002128]

##### Royal Bank of Scotland closure in Rothesay

8.55 pm

**Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Ten years ago, the people of the island of Bute, along with taxpayers from across the United Kingdom, were forced to bail out the Royal Bank of Scotland to the tune of almost £50 billion. Now, without any prior consultation with the people of Bute, RBS plans to close its branch in the town of Rothesay. Just before Christmas, I launched a petition on the island opposing the closure. The petition, which I present to the House today, has gathered hundreds of local people's signatures. I want to put on the record my sincere thanks to those on Bute who pounded the streets in the depths of a Scottish winter to collect so many signatures, and I can assure them that I will continue to do everything I can to stop the closure of the Royal Bank of Scotland branch in Rothesay.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the Isle of Bute,

Declares that proposed closure of the Rothesay branch of the publicly-owned Royal Bank of Scotland will have a detrimental effect on local and surrounding communities and the local economy.

[Brendan O'Hara]

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Her Majesty's Treasury, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Royal Bank of Scotland to take into account the concerns of petitioners and take whatever steps they can to halt the planned closure of this branch.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002129]

## Patient Safety

*Motion made, and Question proposed*, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mike Freer.)

8.56 pm

**Dr Caroline Johnson** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Before I begin my speech, I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Doctors become doctors to help make people better. Patient safety and improving patient care are therefore at the forefront of every doctor's practice. Indeed, when I went for my consultant interview, I was asked to give a presentation on how I would demonstrate to the trust board that paediatric services in that hospital were safe, and my answer, of course, was, "How safe?" As safe as going to a football match? As safe as travelling on the tube? As safe as flying in an aeroplane? Those activities are safe, but, like patient care, nothing is ever 100% safe. We need to ensure that care is as safe as it possibly can be, and that there are processes in place to learn from mistakes. No party has a monopoly on wanting to make the NHS as good as it can be, and all of us know that the increasing demand and complexity would make healthcare a challenge for any Government.

During my career, there have been significant improvements in patient safety, the most important of which is probably the establishment in 2009 of the Care Quality Commission, with its Ofsted-like reports. By 2017, it had inspected every trust, primary care and adult social care provider, and it continues to ensure they are meeting the highest standards. We now also have the regular revalidation of professionals, reflective practice and case reviews, as well as child death overview panels, which review in detail all unexpected child deaths. New maternity systems have been developed that have resulted in clear progress, as seen in the 20% fall in the stillbirth and neonatal mortality rate in England between 2003 and 2013.

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does she agree that the changes to and strengthening of the CQC's remit through the Health and Social Care (Safety and Quality) Act 2015, a private Member's Bill passed with all-party support, represent one step on the long road to ensuring that patient safety and quality care is at the top of the NHS's agenda?

**Dr Johnson:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on passing that private Member's Bill, which has undoubtedly saved many lives.

I am proud to work in a health service that, just last year, was rated the best and safest healthcare system in the world by the independent Commonwealth Fund think-tank. To err is human: we all make mistakes. The consequences of a doctor's error, though, are potentially catastrophic. Doctors live with that responsibility and, as a doctor, I live in fear of making a mistake because I do not wish for anyone to suffer harm.

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): My hon. Friend may have seen that the Medical Protection Society is asking for the bar to be lifted on criminal proceedings and for

the General Medical Council to be shaken up a bit to improve its approach to dealing with this issue. Does she have any sympathy with that?

**Dr Johnson:** I will come on to that later, but I agree with my hon. Friend.

I have worked with at least two colleagues who made significant errors. Many lessons were learned and widely disseminated. Training was provided to stop recurrence, but neither doctor was prosecuted. Throughout my career it has been the case that, if a doctor does their best but makes a genuine error, they will not face criminal charges. Gross negligence manslaughter was seen to be an appropriate sanction for the doctor who refuses to see a patient, who turns up intoxicated or who deliberately does something wrong. That facilitates a no-blame or airline safety-style culture, promoted by the Secretary of State, in which errors are identified and continuous improvements are made.

Following the case of Dr Bawa-Garba, that safety culture and those improvements to patient care are now in jeopardy. Although she was newly back from maternity leave, had not received induction, was covering two people's jobs, had inexperienced junior staff to supervise and had reduced consultant cover, a very busy unit and a broken IT results system to contend with, Dr Bawa-Garba was convicted of gross negligence manslaughter and, more recently, struck off the medical register by the GMC. Those events followed the very sad and tragic death of a little boy, which of course saddens all of us in this House and is something from which his family will never truly recover.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of this particular case, many professionals have seen sufficient ambiguity in the decision that Dr Bawa-Garba was criminally culpable that it has shaken their confidence that they understand the boundary between a genuine error of medical judgment and conduct so exceptionally bad that it amounts to criminal behaviour. It has, in the words of the chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners,

“shaken the entire medical community”.

Although the GMC is an independent organisation, the Government will be aware of concerns raised about its decision making on this case. Perhaps the most high-profile concern was raised earlier this month at the local medical committees conference, where GP leaders passed a vote of no confidence in the GMC. I would be grateful if the Minister elaborated on what the Government are doing in their work with the GMC to ensure it is executing its functions correctly and to restore medical and public confidence in it.

It is right that individuals are held accountable for their actions, but there is always a balance to be struck between accountability and blame. Where the balance is tipped towards blame, individuals become fearful and may attempt to cover their mistakes, preventing them and others from learning; the same errors will therefore be repeated. Since the case of Dr Bawa-Garba, many doctors have become fearful. That culture of fear means that some doctors are being advised to anonymise reflective practice and to avoid uploading those reflective practices on to their e-portfolio. They might unnecessarily escalate decisions previously undertaken themselves or refuse to do more than contracted. That cannot be good for patient safety.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): This issue is not just the preserve of doctors; it, of course, cuts across all health professionals. One of the biggest triggers is the pressure that NHS staff are put under, particularly in respect of their not being able to fulfil their duty of care. Does the hon. Lady recognise that when we have a staff crisis it creates the biggest risk to patients?

**Dr Johnson:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and I agree that this issue of accountability and blame applies equally to all professionals across the health service. Everyone makes mistakes; I was reading online the incident report for the serious investigation done into this young boy's death and I noticed that, although no doubt all care and attention had been paid to ensuring that personal information was redacted, the child's initials appeared in at least one place where someone had forgotten to do that. That is a sign that none of us is ever infallible.

Sanctioning doctors for honest mistakes also runs the risk of discouraging people from joining the profession. At a time when the Government are looking to increase the number of people entering medical careers, through the creation of more places at universities and the establishment of new medical schools, the perception that an honest mistake made later in someone's medical career could end up with their being struck off the register, or even behind bars, risks alienating just the type of young, forward-thinking, ambitious students whom the NHS needs to pursue a career in medicine. It is a testament to the youth of today that medicine still continues to attract the brightest and the best. However, by the same token, these straight-A students have other, more lucrative career paths open to them, and those will become all the more attractive when the risks inherent in a medical career become too high.

This culture of fear not only risks discouraging people from joining the profession, but drives away highly skilled doctors already working in the NHS. As an NHS doctor, one is already expected to work in very challenging conditions, working long hours in an incredibly high-pressure environment. Again, if a perception develops among doctors that they may be treated as a criminal even if when working to the best of their ability, it will quite simply drive doctors away. The world-renowned medical schools we have here in the UK mean that British doctors are in high demand, and they may take their skills to the private sector or further afield to less litigious health services.

The Government recognise these problems and have commissioned an urgent review to look at the threshold for what constitutes gross negligence. This will report by the end of April. I understand that the GMC has also commissioned its own review, although it is not expected to report until the end of the year. Will the Minister tell the House how the Government will act in the meantime to reassure doctors, especially those in high-risk specialties such as paediatrics and obstetrics, that they will not be unduly punished for mistakes?

Overall, it is important that the Government act swiftly on the findings of this report, and consider carefully the impact of the threshold on both the recruitment and retention of medical staff, and safety and improvements to patient care. Doctors want to make people better—it drives all they do. We must stand with them and for them, for all our futures will depend on it.

9.8 pm

**The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinéage):** I wish to start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) on securing this really important debate on patient safety. All patients have a right to expect care that is compassionate, effective and safe. The courageous testimonies of individuals such as Julie Bailey, who exposed the scandalous failings at Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust, and Sara Ryan, who campaigned fearlessly following the death of her son, Connor Sparrowhawk, while in the so-called care of Southern Health, show that safer care starts with listening to patients and their families.

It is important that we recognise that there are many victims when care fails—the families and the loved ones, of course, but also the healthcare professionals who carry the burden of their mistakes. The great majority of NHS patients receive effective and successful care. However, according to international studies, levels of healthcare harm range from 1% for the most “negligent” adverse events, to 8% to 9% for preventable adverse events. We are clear that any level of harm over 0% is unacceptable, and we believe that the route to a safer NHS is through transparency, learning and action. What is most frustrating is when harm persists, despite our having the knowledge and wherewithal to prevent it. There are approximately nine “never events” in the NHS every week—avoidable harms such as wrong-site surgery or foreign objects left after an operation.

Thirty years ago, the aviation industry stood at a similar crossroads. Since then, there has been a massive reduction in fatal accidents every decade, despite a huge increase in the number of passengers. According to the Civil Aviation Authority, there is an average of one fatality for every 287 million passengers carried by UK operators. Compare that with the 150 avoidable deaths every week across the NHS. That rate would potentially equate to the loss of 52 airliners per year.

How has the airline industry transformed its safety record so successfully? The key has been a “just culture” that recognises honest human error, but continues to hold people to account for criminal acts or wilful negligence. Creating a safe space that protects the evidence provided by pilots and air traffic controllers when there is an investigation is a cornerstone of the approach. It helps to create a culture in which people can be open about their errors and a system of learning from one’s mistakes, rather than blaming individuals.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) on securing this debate on an important matter. NHS staff are greatly restricted by their work and the long hours they do. We all know that and pay tribute to them. Sometimes, however, we have to look at better ways of keeping records and at innovations to streamline things to make sure that the real focus of NHS staff is on the work that they do. Has the Minister looked at streamlining and innovations to take away the red tape that restricts the caring job that NHS staff do?

**Caroline Dinéage:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The more we can innovate and put in place the technology that helps to streamline day-to-day processes,

the more that will help NHS staff, who do such a marvellous job, to do their job even more effectively and efficiently.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham rightly said, to err is human. I am told that every year, 30,000 motorists put diesel fuel into their petrol cars—that is around 15 every hour. Those people are not intentionally destructive or feckless, they are human. Of course, I am not making an analogy with medical mistakes, which can be significantly more damaging and life-changing than the need to get a new engine, but in the same sort of way we need to move away from a blame culture in health—away from investigations that single out one individual rather than seeing their actions in the context of a complex overarching system.

**Rachael Maskell:** Robert Francis’s report included 290 recommendations to address these issues, not the least the duty of candour. However, people are still fearful to report—why is that?

**Caroline Dinéage:** I think it is for a variety of reasons. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise that issue; if she bears with me, I shall come to it a little later.

A first step in our new direction, based on an aviation model, is the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch, which became fully operational in April last year and will independently investigate some of the most serious patient safety incidents every year. It is the first investigatory body of its kind in the world and demonstrates our commitment to learning and innovation. As part of the Government’s drive to make the NHS the safest place in the world to give birth, HSIB will standardise investigations of cases of unexplained severe brain injury, intrapartum stillbirths, early neonatal deaths and maternal deaths in England.

As an MP who represents a constituency in the area served by Southern Health, I am particularly aware that tragedy can spiral when an organisation loses sight of systematic problems in its provision of care. Our Learning from Deaths programme is a direct response to such events. Trusts are now expected to have proper arrangements for learning from the deaths of patients and are subject to new reporting arrangements, including evidence of learning and improvements. I should add that we are one of the first countries in the world to measure deaths in this way. Through Learning from Deaths, NHS England is supporting improved engagement across the NHS with bereaved families and carers.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham rightly says, healthcare professionals need to feel safe to speak out about problems in the workplace. To support that, we have introduced an independent national officer for whistleblowing, and new regulations to prevent discrimination against whistleblowers who move jobs. Recent commentary in the media and among professionals has highlighted a possible brake on openness and transparency arising from high profile convictions of healthcare professionals for gross negligence manslaughter, which is exactly the same example as the one that she cited. That is why the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care announced in February that he was asking Professor Sir Norman Williams, former President of the Royal College of Surgeons, to conduct a rapid review into the application of gross negligence manslaughter in healthcare.

Absorbing the review's recommendations into our healthcare system will be crucial to ensure that our healthcare professionals feel valued and secure, and that includes the GMC. The deadline for submitting evidence is April, and I encourage patients, families and professionals to contribute.

It is essential that infants have the best possible start in life, and the safety of mothers and their babies is a fundamental starting point for safer care. In November 2017, the Secretary of State announced his intention to bring forward the ambition to halve the rate of maternal deaths, neonatal deaths, birth-related brain injuries and stillbirths by 2025—a full five years ahead of our previous target. Pre-term birth is a major health inequality with mothers, and the Secretary of State has set an ambitious target to reduce the national rate of pre-term births from 8% to 6%.

Continuity of care is a key factor in a healthy pregnancy. Evidence shows that women who continue to receive care from the same midwives are 19% less likely to

miscarry, and 16% less likely to lose their baby. That is why, yesterday, the Secretary of State announced important steps towards ensuring that the majority of women receive care from the same small team of midwives throughout their pregnancy, labour and birth by 2021. That announcement includes 650 new training places for midwives in 2019, which represents a 25% increase in the number of midwives in the UK.

We can never be complacent. Zero harm might sound impossible to achieve, but it should always be our aim. By learning lessons when things go wrong, listening to patients and their families, and working across the whole system to create a genuine culture of improvement, this Government are making a significant and lasting contribution to patient safety.

*Question put and agreed to.*

9.17 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Westminster Hall

*Wednesday 28 March 2018*

[GERAINT DAVIES *in the Chair*]

## Social Mobility and the Economy

9.30 am

**Geraint Davies (in the Chair):** May I say at the outset that there are 11 speakers, so I will impose a time limit? I call Justine Greening to move the motion.

**Justine Greening (Putney) (Con):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered social mobility and the economy.

Most of our debates in this place are about problems, but today, I want to have a debate about solutions. Improving our poor social mobility is this country's biggest challenge, and our biggest opportunity. Britain will not truly succeed until it becomes a country where there is equality of opportunity for the first time.

Like other hon. Members present, I did not grow up with advantage or privilege. I grew up in Rotherham, south Yorkshire, where my father and grandfather worked in the steel industry. My father would probably have benefited from the national minimum wage being in place and he spent time unemployed, so I know what it is like to grow up in a family on benefits. I am sure that many young people who are starting out today feel the same as I did: I never wanted to have extra advantages over my peers; I just wanted to have the same opportunities as everyone else—a level playing field.

Most people in our county are not connected. They do not necessarily have someone who they can ask for advice on careers when they need it. They do not have someone to make the right introductions to get them work experience. When they apply for jobs, they do not have anyone who knows x, y or z in that company to put in a good word for them. They do not have the contacts to help them to get work experience in the kinds of companies that they might be interested in working for, so they tend not to get as much experience and do not do as well when they apply for jobs. Because of that, far too much of our nation's talent goes to waste, which is totally unacceptable and has to change. There is still such a thing as a class ceiling for most people in Britain, and we have to get rid of it.

A year from now, Britain will be on the verge of Brexit. The debate has divided our country, but the time is rapidly approaching when we will need to come together behind some sort of common vision of what kind of country we want Britain to be post-Brexit. That common vision should be of finally creating a Britain that has equality of opportunity for the first time. Brexit must be a moment for change when we smash that class ceiling on opportunity once and for all. In a knowledge-based, global economy, it has never been more important to use all our nation's talent to the max.

I will focus on social mobility and the economy, and the huge role that businesses can play in driving the economic benefits of social mobility. The social mobility dividend for our economy and our people is significant.

In July, the Sutton Trust published its modelling of the link between stronger social mobility and productivity. The research looked specifically at European countries and found that, if the UK simply improved its performance on social mobility to match the western European average, the benefit to our economy would be an improved annual GDP of between 2.1% and 9%. That is an annual benefit to our economy of between £39 billion to £179 billion, which is the equivalent of each household being £590 to £2,620 better off. We talk about minimising tariffs and barriers to have strong trade, but talent is no different. We know the benefits of free trade, and a free market in talent is just as, or perhaps even more, important.

Education has a huge role to play. The social mobility action plan that I launched before Christmas sets out a clear agenda for the Department for Education to strongly tilt its strategy to lift up the educational prospects of children being left behind. Business has a key role to play too.

**Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP):** I congratulate the right hon. Lady on securing the debate. On educational underachievement, does she agree that, in many working class communities, getting beyond that barrier to achieve is about getting beyond looking at school as a dredge or as something that minimises capability? We have to try to promote that, to ensure that people break the class ceiling, as she puts it.

**Justine Greening:** I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. There are three elements to that. First, it is great that the educational attainment gap is steadily closing, but it needs to happen faster. Secondly, businesses can play a role in lifting the aspirations of young people while they are in our education systems, starting from the earliest age in primary school, which is part of what the social mobility pledge asks companies to come forward and do. Thirdly, we must ensure that businesses continue to nurture and develop young people's talent once they enter the world of work, and that they have a level playing field when they seek to progress their career after leaving the education system.

**Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab):** This is an important debate and having a former Secretary of State for Education here is a real treat for us. At the moment, the Government fund young people who go to university to the tune of about £10,500. For people who go to a further education college, the funding is about half that. For young people who get an apprenticeship, it is about £1,500 on average. For people who fall off the cliff altogether, there is very little money and it is a confused landscape, unless they end up in the criminal justice system, in which case we spend a fortune on them. Does the right hon. Lady believe that it is time the money followed the young person rather than the institution?

**Justine Greening:** The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point. The T-levels reform will help to ensure that the route a young person follows, whether they are interested in a more academic route and university, or want a more vocational, technical route, will be every bit as high quality as any other. Towards the end of my comments, I will briefly talk about how Government reform could enable that to happen more easily.

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): My right hon. Friend makes a powerful case for social mobility. It is important to record that we still have big issues with the attainment gap in Scotland, where children from the most deprived households are much less likely to go to university compared with those in England. Social mobility needs to be spread across the whole United Kingdom. The benefits of people being mobile need to spread to every part of the kingdom, not just those living in London and the south-east.

**Justine Greening:** I could not agree with my hon. Friend more. We face a simple but powerful problem: talent is spread evenly across the country, but opportunity is not. We need to ensure that we nurture that talent. I share his concern that educational attainment in Scotland looks like it is slipping backwards relative to the rest of the UK.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): In response to the point made by the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), it is important to point out that the UCAS website says that

“in Scotland, around one third of admissions are not processed through UCAS, so this provides only part of the picture of entry to higher education”.

That should be placed on the record and hon. Members should keep it in mind. It is important not to do down Scottish education, because there are many positive things about it. A higher percentage of our students who attend university have been to further education courses first, which is not picked up by the UCAS stats either.

**Justine Greening:** A lot of hon. Members, particularly Conservative Members, would dispute those facts.

I recognise that there is an important debate to be had on higher education, but I want to focus my comments on business and the economy because business has a key role to play in improving social mobility in our country. Today, I am asking businesses large and small to commit to a universal social mobility pledge.

I hugely thank David Harrison and the Harrison Centre for Social Mobility for crucially supporting the work to enable us to launch the pledge today. The social mobility pledge is about three things: partnership between schools and businesses; businesses offering access to work experience or apprenticeships; and businesses having recruitment practices that are transparent and open, to promote a level playing field for talent.

First, partnering with schools is something that every single company, big or small, can do. It does not have to be hard. Some outstanding organisations are already providing a platform for action, and the resources needed for companies and businesses to make a start: Speakers for Schools; Inspiring the Future; the Careers and Enterprise Company; and the Prince's Trust, which is setting up the e-mentor scheme, to name just a few. A lot of these organisations want to do more working through business, and they also want to do that in locations outside London and the south-east, where young people often have fewer opportunities. However, we need the fantastic employers in those areas to come forward to help make that happen.

Some great organisations are doing amazing work on access to work experience and apprenticeships, such as the Social Mobility Business Partnership, which can help. I also say a massive “thank you” to Barry Matthews, who set up the SMBP, for his help in working with me recently to help put together the social mobility pledge, so that companies large and small can get behind it. The Social Mobility Foundation does a huge amount of great work. Alongside that is the Sutton Trust, which I mentioned earlier and which has pioneered so many of the great initiatives that we have learned from and that companies can get involved in.

All companies can make a decision to open their doors and let young people who might not have any idea about that organisation come in and spend time learning about it, shadowing people and working on projects that give them a sense of what working in those careers is like.

**Sarah Champion** (Rotherham) (Lab): This is a fantastic speech and I thank the right hon. Lady for sharing her experience and ideas. In Rotherham, which she knows well, employers are looking to open their doors, but we also need teachers and parents to give the young people a shove to go over the threshold.

**Justine Greening:** The hon. Lady is right—this must be a two-way street. I put the call out to teachers to have the confidence to work with businesses that want to come and help raise aspirations for their young people, just as teachers themselves do. Inspiring the Future works successfully with thousands of schools—primary and secondary—around our country. We know such activity can work and we know how it benefits those children. Today, I am seeking to expand the opportunities for children who currently do not have enough of them.

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Businesses such as South East Coachworks, Macknade and BMM Weston in my constituency make huge efforts to give kids work experience and opportunities, as do schools such as the Abbey School. However, the children still tell me that they want more work experience, and to know more about career opportunities and what work will be like. I fully support my right hon. Friend's initiative to make it easier for businesses and schools to work together and give children the opportunities that can help them to get ahead in life.

**Justine Greening:** I am grateful for that intervention because it gives me the chance to point out that a recent study up in the north-east showed that 83% of young people felt that having work experience should be a compulsory part of the school curriculum. The challenge that they and we face is that there are not enough opportunities for them to do that—it does not matter whether they are growing up in Kent or in Newcastle. Businesses alone can help us to close that gap between the work experience that young people know they need and want, and the opportunities for them to do that while they are going through school.

The final piece of the pledge is about open recruitment practices. Changes such as introducing name-blind recruitment or contextual recruitment can help to promote a level playing field for candidates. In name-blind recruitment, the candidate's name is replaced by a number

and their CV is then assessed as normal. Employers can have unconscious bias in respect of black and minority ethnic candidates, and name bias based on gender and traditional working-class names, so name-blind approaches work. That is why Clifford Chance, a major law company, uses name-blind recruitment—in fact, it is one of the founding companies signed up to the pledge.

Contextual recruitment, which was referred to in the Social Mobility Commission's annual report in 2016, takes into account the situation in which the academic and personal success of a candidate have been achieved, and how their performance compares with that of their peers from similar backgrounds who have had similar opportunities. It is already used by companies such as Deloitte, and by some of the magic circle law firms such as Linklaters. The research shows that disadvantaged applicants were 50% more likely to be hired using contextual recruitment than they otherwise would have been.

Finally, I am especially grateful for the support of the CBI, the Federation of Small Businesses, the British Chambers of Commerce, and the many businesses that have signed up to the pledge, including companies such as BT, ITV, Adidas, Severn Trent, Viacom, KPMG, Aviva and PwC, to name just a few. The British Chambers of Commerce is encouraging all 75,000 of its members to sign up to the pledge, which is fantastic. Achieving that would be transformational. Similarly, the Federation of Small Businesses is behind the pledge and is encouraging its 170,000 members to commit to it.

**Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con):** What my right hon. Friend is saying is very powerful. In the north-east of Scotland, we are obviously dominated by the oil and gas industry, but there are skills shortages—they are not necessarily among graduates but among those from a technical college or technical college background. I do not want to overly politicise this debate, but we have to ensure we get the balance right. In my constituency, Aker Solutions and Wood Group—two huge employers—are concerned about getting enough technical and engineering staff. Are we getting the balance of academia—technical colleges and universities—and apprenticeships right?

**Justine Greening:** The short answer is that we do not know, because to date young people have not really had the choices that they want and deserve when they want to follow a technical education route. If our technical education reforms open up that form of education as an opportunity for young people, it would not only be a win for them—young people should not have to stop their education just because they do not want to follow an academic route—but a huge win for British business, which is crying out for the skills these young people want to learn. In launching the pledge today, I seek to knit together those aligned incentives and hopes, so that we can start to unlock opportunity for both young people and businesses.

I will briefly draw my comments to a close. As I have said, with this level of support from companies large and small, I believe that we can work together to have a huge impact. I would also like Members of Parliament from both sides of the House to work collectively to make a difference in our local communities. That is what I will do. I will ask my local companies to commit

to the social mobility pledge, and will sign up to the pledge as an employer. We should seek to work on a cross-party basis to galvanise British business, because we know that, when Parliament speaks with one voice, business listens.

I also hope the Government support the social mobility pledge and align cross-departmental policy to help us to go further and faster on social mobility. For example, we could look at how the apprenticeship levy can evolve, whether extending into supporting work experience or focusing on geographic areas that need more investment in training, such as opportunity areas. We can look at the development of degree apprenticeships, which are hugely popular but are in the early days of making the impact that they can make.

In the spring statement two weeks ago, the Chancellor rightly set out how he is asking the Office for National Statistics to assess how we can better value our human capital. That is crucial, because if things are not valued properly, they are not invested in properly. I hope the Treasury can reform even more to shift its decision making to more overtly invest in a socially mobile Britain. That is not just about smarter valuing of our investment in people, but better measurement of our national progress on social mobility and opportunity. That means having a longer timeframe for investments and budgeting, so that when we invest in children and young people, we see the value that it creates over a lifetime and not just over the next five years. Realistically, five years gives little chance for this sort of investment to be demonstrably realised.

In conclusion, it might feel like a huge ask to change the country forever and deliver on social mobility, which we have never been able to do, but it is about a collective effort. It is about lots of people doing lots of things. I am not asking all of us to do everything. I just need us each to make a change in our local communities, whether as MPs, businesses or individuals. It is a start if Putney businesses improve Putney, and if Rotherham businesses improve Rotherham. If the Government back that up with smart policy at a national level, things can change. Tackling social mobility is complex. It is like a million-piece jigsaw puzzle, but people need to do their piece. If we all do that, the picture gets completed. We need to do that to get more opportunities for more young people, so that we have equality of opportunity. I hope the social mobility pledge can be a step along the road to delivering just that.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Geraint Davies (in the Chair):** Order. I am going to need to immediately impose a time limit of four minutes, which I may need to reduce if there are interventions. I call Sarah Champion to set an example by speaking for four minutes or less.

9.51 am

**Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. It is the greatest pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening), who is a Rotherham girl. She lives and breathes exactly what she is outlining. Her family background is very common in Rotherham. The fact that she has achieved such incredible heights is genuinely an inspiration to my constituents. It is exactly

[Sarah Champion]

what we are looking to do. I fully support her social mobility pledge. I urge her to come back to Rotherham so that we can work together to make it happen.

I am particularly proud that a woman is launching the social mobility pledge, and a great deal is owed to the right hon. Lady for her work on this. We have now got cracks in the glass ceiling. Indeed, as she rightly said—I am going to steal her line—a ton of bricks is now falling on the class ceiling. That is something we have to address as a country, not least because this week the Children's Commissioner highlighted the huge gaps that exist between the poorest children in the north and the poorest in the south. Her report found that a child on free school meals living in Hackney is three times more likely to go to university than a child on free school meals from Hartlepool. London children on free school meals are 40% more likely to achieve good maths and English GCSEs than children in the north. Rotherham, by contrast, ranks 188th out of 324 local authority areas for social mobility and has the seventh highest secondary school exclusion rates in the country. The Children's Commissioner found that too many children are dropping out of education and training before 18, with several northern cities having more than 10% of children missing out on crucial parts of their education.

The all-party parliamentary group on social mobility recognised that social mobility is improved through education and high-quality teaching, yet its former chair now leads a Department that is cutting school funding by 4.6% between 2015 and 2019. Across England, more than half a million primary school children are in super-sized classes. Between 2014-15 and 2016-17, class sizes in Rotherham rose in more than half of our schools and the pupil to teacher ratio rose in two thirds. Some 57% of schools have cut their staff. While the Government talk of a fairer funding formula, schools in Rotherham will have suffered cuts of nearly £3 million between 2015-16 and 2019-20. I fail to understand how that can help our children reach their potential.

Another issue that we cannot ignore is the economic environment that children live in. I am pleased that the Children's Commissioner recognised that northern children are proud and optimistic, but her report found that many lacked confidence that economic regeneration will mean more job opportunities for them.

Rotherham ranks 119th out of 650 constituencies on the highest number of young people claiming jobseeker's allowance and universal credit. According to the Office for National Statistics, productivity growth nationally over the past 10 years was the weakest since modern records began. We have some fantastic businesses in Britain. As the right hon. Lady knows, we have fantastic businesses in Rotherham, but there is a serious skills shortage, as she outlined. A recent survey from the British Chambers of Commerce found that skills shortages were reaching critical levels in the last quarter of 2017. How will we address the gap and the lack of productivity if we are not training our young people in the skills needed for a modern economy?

In Rotherham, many businesses are in manufacturing. They recognise—

**Geraint Davies (in the Chair):** Order. I invite Gillian Keegan to try to get below four minutes.

9.56 am

**Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) for securing this debate.

Everybody should be given the opportunity to make the most of their life, irrespective of where they were born. It is equality of opportunity that matters. The Social Mobility Commission report published last year identified hotspots and coldspots, which were areas with higher and lower levels of social mobility. I never considered Knowsley, where I grew up, to be a particularly socially mobile region, but it ranks reasonably well at 171st out of the 325 local authorities in England. What may come as a surprise is that my constituency of Chichester is 287th. Chichester is not unique in that respect, as a quarter of coastal authorities were classified as coldspots, and only 6% were identified as hotspots.

The problems are clear and have been for generations. Tackling the issue is complex, but incredibly important, not only for the young people who gain an opportunity to change their circumstances, but for the economy. In 2016, the Sutton Trust estimated that just reaching Europe's social mobility average would equate to an annual increase to GDP of 2%. It is key that we bring out people's talents at all ages. Almost every one of my classmates in my failing comprehensive school in Knowsley had talent and the potential to achieve whatever they put their minds to. Some of us beat the odds despite our school, but others did not get that opportunity. They were let down in school and were not offered enough support or alternative routes into work when they left at just 16. From attending a failing comprehensive school every day for five years, I know there was as much talent there as on the playing fields of Eton.

My social mobility journey came in the form of an apprenticeship that I started at 16, so I know from personal experience the benefits they can provide. It gave me seven years of work experience, a degree and no student debt—all I needed to build a career. It was a business that changed my life, not school. More than 3.4 million young people have started apprenticeships since 2010. Although that is a significant achievement, we must work to ensure that they are high-quality training programmes. I am pleased that we are seeing a greater emphasis on quality, with advanced and higher level apprenticeships up by 35% last year as compared with the previous year.

Colleges, universities and business are developing successful, collaborative relationships. Chichester College has seen more than 25,000 apprentices pass through its doors, and its success continues with increased participation year on year. Some 94% of level 2 apprentices continue into employment or further education. The college has put employability at the heart of its curriculum, and it is working with around 5,000 businesses to do that. At the University of Chichester, 34% of its largely regional intake are from the lowest household income groups, and more than half are the first generation in their family to participate in higher education. The university has increased its numbers and is reaching out to the latent local marketplace.

It is important to remember that even if all those opportunities pass someone by, it is never too late for them to learn and improve their opportunities in life.

There are such programmes as “Get into”, which is run by the Prince’s Trust; the “Choose Work” programme that Chichester District Council runs, which is designed to help young people get work experience; and the brilliant work of Business in the Community, which works to give young people CV and interview training and work experience. Many businesses are now involved in Business in the Community.

Different areas have always varied in social mobility outcomes. My life has been what some might call a social mobility success story. The solution to better outcomes for young people is multi-faceted, but we should tap into talent wherever it is to satisfy growing demand and bolster our economy.

**Geraint Davies (in the Chair):** Finished with eight seconds to go. Excellent.

10 am

**Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab):** I apologise, Mr Davies: I will have to leave the debate a few minutes early to get a ticket for Prime Minister’s Question Time. I thank the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) for allowing us to debate this really important issue. I know how committed she was to social mobility when she was Secretary of State for Education.

The right hon. Lady knows that the roots of social mobility start far earlier than a place on work experience. They start from birth, primarily in the first 18 months of a child’s life. By the time a child gets to school, a poor child is 18 months behind its classmates. A poor child—let us call her Jo—is 27 times more likely to go to an inadequate school than a well-off peer. She is one of the 50% of children from low income families who do not reach the expected developmental milestones by age five. Because of her low progress by age seven, Jo has just a 50% chance of avoiding the bottom of attainment when she completes her GCSEs almost a decade later. That does not come as a surprise. Her secondary school is also more likely to be disadvantaged, with stark evidence that the top-performing comprehensives prove to be highly socially selective, with only 9.4% of pupils eligible for free school meals in the top-performing 500 comprehensive schools—let us not get started on selective schools—which is far lower than the 17.2% average.

When Jo tries to secure an invaluable internship, she cannot afford the £1,019 a month cost of its being unpaid, and she does not have the high-powered networks that could offer a golden ticket into a business. Meanwhile, Jo is trying to find a home.

Most Members, many from London and the south-east, know that at their advice surgery they will see hundreds of families terrified of losing their private rented accommodation and being placed in temporary accommodation. If someone lives in south-west London, temporary accommodation means Birmingham, Kent or Luton. How does a child continue to go to school if they live so far away in temporary accommodation? How do they have the confidence and security of being able to study if they never know where they and their mum will be able to live or how many brothers and sisters will be in the same bedroom? That is the reality for the many families that we see.

Although confidence and a personal contribution are paramount, we cannot ignore the social system in which many children and young people find themselves. It is not a level playing field, because they are far behind the starting line from the very moment of their birth.

10.3 am

**David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con):** It is a great pleasure to be able to contribute to this debate today. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) on her excellent speech and on opening the debate on this important topic, which I know she is passionate about. I was honoured to be able to work closely with her as her Whip when she was Secretary of State for Education. I particularly welcome her speech, her approach and the support she has already received from the business sector. I welcome and endorse strongly her social mobility pledge. Partnership, access to work experience, a level playing field and of course open recruiting are vital if we are to go forward and utilise the talent that we have across the whole country.

As a former teacher and lecturer, education and social mobility are particular passions of mine and are areas in which I have always tried to be involved. We are discussing social mobility in Britain to ultimately ensure that everyone has the opportunity to build a good life for themselves, regardless of their family background or the area of the country that they come from. In a socially mobile society, every individual should have a fair chance of reaching their full potential. Social mobility is not only good from a moral perspective, but from an economic perspective. By ensuring that talent is harvested across the social spectrum, we have the opportunity to boost productivity and GDP, more of which later.

I come from a family that grew up in the east end of London. It was education, opportunity, good teachers, family encouragement and also some businesses that allowed me work experience that gave me an appetite to develop. I grew up in Essex, but my family background was in Bow, where opportunities were very limited except through education, so we need to look across the country to make sure that opportunities are greater than currently exist in some places.

I actually enjoyed work experience because it meant I met other people and did other things. I learnt and got into the habit of getting up and getting there on time and participating as far as I could.

The Government have made considerable progress on education and opportunities, with 1.9 million more children now in good or outstanding schools. That is a real achievement and we should not minimise that. We should be proud of what has been done, but we need to do more. Local and central Government cannot do it all. It has to be businesses and communities—all of us—contributing and participating.

We are rather fortunate in my borough of Bexley. We are a hotspot when it comes to these things. We achieve things and I am proud of the opportunities that businesses, the council and Government policies have encouraged, which has resulted in a very good situation, but it is not enough. Even within Bexley there are children who underachieve and do not have ambition. I have always fought hard against people who say, “What can you expect? They come from that background in more deprived

[*David Evennett*]

parts of the borough.” That is absolute rubbish. Everyone has the potential wherever they come from, and we must realise it and get opportunities for every individual. I had a longer speech, but unfortunately I have not got time to do it.

The Government, of course, have a key role, but when we look at the figures, the “State of the Nation 2017: Social Mobility in Great Britain” report found that only 6% of doctors and 12% of chief executives were from working class origins. More has to be done. In conclusion, we need a plan, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney has offered us a good plan that we can all sign up to. It is not party political; it is something for the benefit of this country and I endorse it strongly.

**Geraint Davies (in the Chair):** Because of the discipline and rigour of Members, I am now able to raise the limit to five minutes. Somebody has kindly pulled out of the debate.

**David Evennett:** I lost a minute!

**Geraint Davies (in the Chair):** I am sorry about that.

10.7 am

**Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and to follow the right hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (David Evennett), who made a powerful speech. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) on securing this important debate on social mobility and the economy. She made a passionate and practical speech.

People in my community too often feel like social mobility no longer applies to them. I am told time and again by my constituents during my surgeries and on the doorsteps of Barnsley East that the economy is not working for them, and that they are being held back. It is difficult to disagree or to reassure them because they are not entirely wrong. In my constituency and across Barnsley, someone’s postcode still to this day determines their life chances and what they can, or rather cannot, become.

The Social Mobility Foundation has identified that Barnsley sits in the bottom 10% of local authorities in the country on the social mobility index. I am sure that, through her experience of growing up in nearby Rotherham, the right hon. Member for Putney knows the area well, and is at least familiar with the challenges it faces. She will also know that she remains in the minority for those born and raised in south Yorkshire. To put it simply, starting from childhood, life chances in Barnsley are far below those provided elsewhere. As many hon. Members have said, that must change.

A huge percentage of children in Barnsley’s classrooms are eligible for free school meals and come from disadvantaged backgrounds, but fewer than 10% of those children will go on to study at university—one of the lowest rates in the country. That is put into perspective, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) outlined, when compared with, for instance, the 50% of disadvantaged children in Kensington and

Chelsea who will go on to higher education. Despite those struggles, Barnsley’s schools have fewer resources to progress.

Once past those struggles in childhood, the economy lags in providing the opportunities for people to get on in life. The mining industry, which helped to shape our community, once provided employment for more than 30,000 people. Although the work was hard and often dangerous, it was secure and well paid. The economic landscape is different now. The largest private sector employers in my constituency are in distribution. Both unemployment and youth unemployment are substantially higher than the national average. The average weekly wage in Barnsley East is a full 10% lower than the UK average. Across the area, many people are trapped in insecure and precarious employment, on short-term or flexible contracts. There is less certainty of work, no guaranteed income, no planning past the next week’s rota, which may change at the last minute, and no economic security to provide food or pay the bills. Such an economy is not conducive to social mobility.

For social mobility in Barnsley, and my constituency of Barnsley East, we desperately need an inclusive economy that provides the security of wages, and the opportunities that people have missed out on for too long. We need secure, long-term employment with a guaranteed income that allows people to plan, save and look further than the next pay packet. Most of all, we need an economy that works for people in Barnsley, that allows workers to advance and progress; that allows children to aspire and achieve; and that provides the opportunities and conditions for genuine social mobility, which has evaded our community for too long.

10.11 am

**Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) on introducing the debate, and I thank you, Mr Davies, for giving dispensation for members of the Public Accounts Committee to leave a few minutes before the end.

Social mobility is key. Given that the United Kingdom is one of the most immobile countries in the OECD, social mobility is not just desirable but essential for sustainable economic growth. When I go into schools and community groups in my constituency, people do not want platitudes or soundbites, but action and opportunities that matter to them and give them a way to progress.

My right hon. Friend mentioned education. There are educational challenges across the United Kingdom. In Scotland, our educational standards in maths, science and other key STEM subjects are falling behind in the programme for international student assessment rankings. Scotland used to be No. 1 in the United Kingdom for education; it is now No. 3, which is a worrying trend. A teacher shortage means that a £15 million fund for the underprivileged has gone unspent. We learned earlier this month that, due to the teacher shortage, we have not had the resources to spend that money, which had been put aside to help those from the most deprived backgrounds.

As my right hon. Friend mentioned, we are seeing a disturbing trend of fewer people from deprived backgrounds making it to university from some parts of the United

Kingdom than from others. Even more worryingly, in my constituency in Scotland we are not increasing social mobility, but decreasing it. That is happening against a backdrop of increasing employment, and a slight improvement on the Gini coefficient pretty much right across the United Kingdom. Despite that, we are still not giving people real opportunities early on in life so that they can pole-vault forward.

Many good points have been made in today's debate—I will not repeat them—but I will focus on social capital and lifelong learning on top of the broader educational point that other Members have made. Social capital is a topic that was spoken about at the turn of the century, certainly in universities and academic institutions, in discussing communities that had gone through post-industrialisation and no longer had the bridging and bonding capital that made many communities in the western world such successes. That capital enabled people to go from place to place and to step up, and ensured that the next generation was always better off than the previous one.

It is not just about the fact that students are leaving school with poorer highers or GCSEs; it is about what comes after that. Even if a mistake has been made or an opportunity has not been provided early on, people must be given a second or even a third opportunity later in life. It is important that we do not allow poor GCSEs or poor highers to write someone off early, as is so often the case in this country.

I am lucky that in my constituency we have Forth Valley College, which is a further education college that tries to promote lifelong learning, whether in the form of evening classes, working in partnership with businesses, going for apprenticeships, or working with public bodies. It is important that we provide that opportunity throughout people's lives. I give credit to the Labour party for one of their policies in the last election: funding people through lifelong learning, and giving people access to funds to go back to college, and do different types of qualifications at any stage of their life. People are now living into their 80s and 90s, which is not what our original welfare system was designed for. We need to ask ourselves how we can give people the opportunity to have two, three or perhaps even four careers in their lifetime, as some hon. Members may well have had.

I am conscious of time, but I want to address on a more practical level what we can do in our constituencies as MPs. In my constituency, we are fortunate enough to have two city deals coming: the Stirling and Clackmannanshire deal, and the Tay Cities deal. I have been speaking to representatives from the Prince's Trust to ensure that those city deals do not just bring financial investment and physical assets into our constituency, but improve social and human capital. I am working with those organisations, and with communities, to ensure that, when we talk about investment, we do so in the broadest possible terms. It is not just about road, rail and wires, but about the social capital and the bonding and bridging capital that allows our communities to come together, and allows people to leap through different communities because they can go as far as their abilities allow them.

Social mobility is one of the key reasons I stood for election to this place. I believe it is incumbent on us as MPs that, when someone has had a door closed in their face, we always open a window to give them an opportunity to succeed, whatever stage of their life they are in.

10.16 am

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I warmly congratulate the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) on an excellent speech. It is clear from her time as Secretary of State for Education that she had a desire to advance social mobility, and it is shame that she is no longer in that position.

When I saw this debate on the Order Paper, I welcomed the opportunity to take part in it. I am conscious that, as somebody who was born to a single parent, and who grew up on a council estate in Glasgow and left school at 16, I am probably the exception to the rule in terms of having got to the House of Commons, given my class and the people I went to school with. I grew up in the shadow of the Cranhill water tower, and I now work in the shadow of Big Ben. It is important that we have come to speak in this debate, and that we do not pull the ladder up behind us.

I do not want to get into an egg-throwing match on education with my colleagues from Scotland in the Conservative party, because I think it has been a constructive debate. We can do more on education. My wife is a primary schoolteacher, so it is not an alien concept to me. I am disappointed that the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) did not mention that the Scottish Government are investing in the pupil equity fund. I see that in my constituency, with organisations such as Beacon Warriors and Licketyspitt doing work in schools. As I say, I do not want to make that a party political point.

One area that I will focus on today is internships, but before I do, I will address the issue of apprenticeships. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), who is a fellow former modern apprentice. It is important that we put more emphasis in this place on modern apprenticeships. I am glad that we have invested in apprenticeships north of the border. Politicians are beginning to understand that we cannot just have a factory churning out people who go through primary and secondary education, go to university, and then get their masters. In order to have a diverse economy, it is important that we invest in apprenticeships. I make the plea that I always make, which is for pay equality for young people. Unfortunately, at the moment under-25s are excluded from the national living wage, and apprentices under UK law can still be paid as little as £3.50 per hour. If we are serious about building a country that works for everyone, we have to pay people appropriately.

The main thing I want to speak about is internships. I had the fortune to undertake a political internship a number of years ago. It was unpaid, and there is a wider debate that we could have about such internships. However, at this time of year when we, as MPs, are looking at our staffing budgets, this debate challenged me to think about what I am doing as a Member of Parliament to bring through the next generation of politicians—not people who studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics at university, but people from different backgrounds. That is why I am very pleased to be advertising a paid internship. It is called the John Wheatley internship in recognition of a Labour MP for east Glasgow in the 1920s who came to Parliament and did an immense amount of good on housing.

[David Linden]

There is a challenge to us as politicians to ensure that, when we take people on in our offices, we pay them appropriately. If we are serious about getting people into politics and serious about our offices representing our communities, we cannot just take people from the local university societies.

**Stephanie Peacock:** Working with the local college, Barnsley College, I have a living wage apprentice in my office. My apprentice, Adam, works in my office and then spends some of his time studying. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would be good to encourage Members across the House to have political internships and apprenticeships both in Westminster and in the constituency?

**David Linden:** Absolutely. I genuinely and warmly commend the hon. Lady for having an apprentice who she pays the national living wage. This is a subject very close to my heart, and the leadership she is showing is to be commended—others in the House should certainly be doing so. The issue of internships is something we have to grapple with. We know that a number of offices have unpaid internships—I am sure some of my colleagues have people on unpaid internships—but if we are serious about getting people from different backgrounds involved in politics, we need to show leadership.

On social tourism, I get quite annoyed at *The Guardian* for continuing to use the same photograph of run-down flats that were demolished about 10 years ago, but it is fairly well known that Glasgow East is not exactly the richest part of the world. In my constituency, the headteacher at Sandaig Primary is open about the fact that some of the children who go there have never seen sand. One of the ways we can take people from different backgrounds and show them different things is through the concept of social tourism. I commend the Family Holiday Association. Getting people into different environments and out of their comfort zone is hugely important.

This has been a very good debate, although it is a shame that it was only 90 minutes. There is definitely the appetite from Members for a Backbench Business Committee debate. I urge the right hon. Member for Putney to continue. I think she will find cross-party support.

10.21 am

**Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con):** It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) on securing this important debate.

It is a pleasure to follow colleagues who have spoken so eloquently on this critical subject. In a similar way to other Members, I come at it from my experience and my life's journey. I attended a comprehensive school in a normal part of the west midlands, and I now find myself in this place. What a great privilege that is, but it is incumbent on all of us to continue the fight. My right hon. Friend the Member for Putney is setting out a marker and providing great leadership, which I am delighted to be able to follow, on the practical work that we can all do in our constituencies. I very much come at the issue from a place-based perspective.

Statistics from the Social Mobility Commission show that Britain is divided and that a child's prospects are affected not only by how much their parents earn and their ethnicity but by geography. The west midlands is particularly poor in social mobility, as I saw as an employer in Birmingham before I came into this place. I saw a lack of aspiration and a social mobility divide in practice in that city.

To tackle that, I set up my own charity, Skilled and Ready. We were instrumental in bringing together local employers to create an awards programme that was delivered in local schools, to help students recognise and develop employability skills. I am very proud that that delivered change for the young people who went through the programme.

When I became an MP, I was mindful of the fact that our area is behind in social mobility indicators. More than a third of areas in the west midlands are social mobility coldspots, and that unfortunately includes my constituency of Redditch. I started to engage as a priority with schools, colleges and businesses in the constituency, and it became clear to me that there is deprivation on a number of indicators, which other hon. Members have referred to. There is also the issue of aspiration. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney, I firmly believe that, while the Government have a role to play, businesses do too. They are instrumental. I welcome this debate because it identifies some practical things that we can all do.

I am working with the Mayor's mentor scheme, set up by the current Mayor of the West Midlands, Andy Street, to create a Redditch mentors programme. I pay tribute to the schools that have already signed up—Heart of Worcestershire College, Tudor Grange Academy, Trinity High School, Ridgeway High School and Arrow Vale. Some fantastic businesses have also indicated their support, including Simon Hyde from Faun Zoeller, Julie Dyer from Heller, Darren Houlcroft, Keith Gardner from MSP and Nicola Hall from Bellis Training. They have all signed up and committed to becoming mentors for local schools in my constituency. I thank them most sincerely for what they are doing. It is a fantastic commitment and investment of their time to help young people in Redditch.

I very much welcome the initiative that my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney has laid out in her social mobility pledge. I will be taking that on board and encouraging the pioneering businesses in Redditch that have already committed to this agenda to follow that lead and to add their names to the campaign.

I have been inspired by the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) and the hon. Member for Glasgow East to think about what more I can do as a Member of Parliament, because we have a unique opportunity to spread the message about how important this work is.

I do not believe that maintaining the status quo is an option. It is not fit for purpose. The issue of social mobility is not just about creating a fairer and equal society. It is about addressing social, educational and economic divisions, which are unsustainable and are having a detrimental impact on our labour market and our competitiveness as a country.

10.26 am

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Davies. I commend the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) for holding this debate on an important topic. One thing she said that rang true with me was that when she started out, she was not asking for special treatment, she just wanted the same opportunities as everyone else. That is such an important point to make. She spoke of the significant gains to the economy from nurturing its talent and the part that businesses have to play in that. That is crucial as well. She also set out some interesting proposals that might address that, along with her pledge, and made some points about blind and contextual CVs. As she said, we all have our part to play. She spoke of a million-piece jigsaw puzzle, which is a good image for us to take away. We should all play our part in trying to make social mobility possible for our young people and others throughout society.

The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) spoke of the importance of economic regeneration and the part that that plays in social mobility. She highlighted this Government's cuts to school funding and talked of the gaps in productivity, and asked how training can be provided urgently to fill those gaps.

The hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) shared her personal experiences with us. I always find such points very interesting. She spoke at length of the benefit of apprenticeships, but stressed the importance of them being high-value apprenticeships, which is another good point.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) gave a passionate speech. She spoke of poor accommodation, poor schooling and the social systems that put children "far behind the starting line" before they even start. That is a very good point indeed. She spoke of the effect on young people's confidence and feelings of security, and the longer term impact on them.

The right hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (David Evennett) also spoke of personal experiences and how the opportunities he received helped him along his way. He called for everyone to receive the same opportunities. He made one point that really startled me: that only 6% of doctors come from working-class backgrounds. That is an extraordinary and sobering point.

The hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) pointed out that less than 10% of young people in her constituency will go on to university. She suggested that what was needed was an inclusive economy with secure employment that allows for future planning.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), in a very fine speech, also talked about the importance of investing in apprenticeships and of fair pay for those apprenticeships, and about what he is doing personally as a politician with the internship scheme in his office. That is a great example to set. He also spoke of how social tourism can help in taking children away from their day-to-day environment and exposing them to different experiences.

In preparation for this debate, I turned to the "State of the Nation" report with interest, anticipating a thoroughly good read. The chapter on Scotland and Wales—neither nation got its own chapter, unfortunately—

pointed out right at the start that the data available for Scotland does not measure social mobility, nor does the data for Wales. It seems that that is because successive Scottish Administrations have concentrated on alleviating poverty rather than measuring social mobility. Of course, alleviating poverty is not easy if the Government are hellbent on cutting social security payments and limiting the funds available to the most vulnerable members of society for ideological reasons. So we find ourselves discussing England and its problems again. The Social Mobility Commission's "Time for change" report was clear that two decades of chasing higher social mobility have made no difference. Fervent ministerial announcements turn out not to deliver results—who would have thought it?

It is important to acknowledge that when the right hon. Member for Putney was in office she put in place a plan for addressing some educational inequalities, and it appears to have been well received. I admit that I have not read it because it concentrates on English education, but I was intrigued to see that it followed the Scottish Government down the path of addressing the attainment gap. That is a very good thing and is to be encouraged. I hope the Minister will indicate whether that plan will be implemented.

As many, many people tell us at great length, education is one of the great levellers. It is key to ensuring that talent rises and talented people are rewarded. How education is paid for is equally important. I was intrigued by the recent publication of evidence from Robert Plomin and Emily Smith-Woolley of King's College, which showed that selective schools add next to no benefit to education. Funnily enough, the "Freakonomics" economist Steven Levitt found the same thing in Chicago.

The real inhibitor of social mobility in education comes when a young adult leaves tertiary education. The burden of student loans that graduates carry is substantial. I think I am correct in calculating that an English student studying in London for three years could leave with more than £60,000 of debt. For someone from a less affluent background who secures employment in a graduate entry-level job, that debt will stay with them for years.

**Luke Graham:** Setting aside the discourtesy of not being mentioned in the hon. Lady's summation—I am a Scottish Conservative colleague, but that is fine—on tuition fees, perhaps she can advise her colleagues in Edinburgh truly to lead the way and not charge tuition fees to English, Welsh and Irish students, who are great friends in our one United Kingdom.

**Deidre Brock:** That point has been made many times by the hon. Gentleman's colleagues, and he has heard the very good reasons why that is not happening. He wants me to mention his contribution, but I find it difficult to get past the fact that, once again, the Scottish Tories talked down the Scottish education system. It is a constant disappointment that every time they mention Scottish education in this place, they do nothing but complain about the work that is being done there. Some fantastic work is going on in Scottish education at the moment, and it would be lovely to hear the Scottish Tories occasionally acknowledge that.

**David Linden:** Does my hon. Friend share my bemusement about the fact that the Scottish Tories who are left in this debate—two thirds of them have left the

[David Linden]

Chamber—continue to harp on about investing in education, yet they rail against any increases in income tax for higher earners in Scotland? The options are either to increase income tax or to cut public spending, which would mean cuts to education. Does she agree that the position of the Conservative party in Scotland seems ridiculous?

**Deidre Brock:** Indeed. I agree with my hon. Friend. It is difficult to see exactly where the Scottish Tories are coming from on this—they are so confused.

For someone from a less affluent background who secures employment in a graduate entry-level job, that debt will stay with them for years. That is if they even manage to get what we once would have considered a graduate job. One in 20 graduates do not find any work at all, and the destinations of others is often less than optimal.

During the time that graduates carry that debt, they have less disposable income, their contribution to the economy is lessened, they find it more difficult to get on to the property ladder, decisions about starting a family are made more difficult, and their career decisions are limited. When they have children, that disadvantage is passed on, because they will not have advanced as far in life as they might have done if they did not have to carry that debt. It might be advisable for anyone who believes in improving social mobility to look at removing or alleviating that debt. Abolishing tuition fees would be a start.

To digress a little, I recommend that Members read the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's paper on migration and social mobility from 2005, which suggests that immigration encourages social mobility in the UK. That is on top of what we know already.

**Siobhain McDonagh:** If I could take the hon. Lady to my constituency, I would take her to homes where there is not a stick of furniture. In those homes are Tamil and African families, whose children are the doctors, lawyers and engineers of tomorrow. Social mobility is an issue of class and ethnicity. That is difficult for us to talk about, but in London we certainly need to talk about it.

**Deidre Brock:** I thank the hon. Lady for that interesting point about her constituency. We already know that immigration is a driver of the economy, and I would recommend a dose of extra immigration to any nation that wants to forge ahead.

10.35 am

**Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab):** It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I think we would all agree that we have heard some excellent contributions today from both sides of the Chamber. I thank the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) for securing this debate. She knows that I have a very high regard for her, and that I think she is a real loss to the Government. I agree with much of what she said. In her creditable time as Secretary of State for Education, she set out a genuinely engaged geographical disadvantage agenda, for which the former social mobility commissioners argued. She deserves our thanks for moving the debate forward in that way.

I have been in my job for only a few short weeks, and I will admit that this debate is a little early for me, but it gives me an opportunity to say a little about where our work on social mobility is going. This week, the Children's Commissioner for England released a report called "Growing up North". She argued that regional development plans, such as the northern powerhouse, must consider necessary infrastructure such as good schools and appropriate post-16 routes to be just as important as rail and roads. I want to quote what she said, because it expresses a broader truth about social mobility:

"Children growing up in the North love and are proud of the place they live. They want a future where they live near their family and community and they want jobs and opportunities to rival anywhere else in the country."

She is right. For too long, in too many places, social mobility has meant literally moving away. It is a hard truth, but if young people do not have the opportunity to realise their potential in their home towns, many will go away to university or find jobs elsewhere, and will stay away. We do not have an economy that works for all parts of our country. We force people to move out of their communities, because the basic infrastructure to enable economic growth is lacking in our regions.

**Rachel Maclean:** I very much agree with what the hon. Lady is saying. As a representative of a midlands constituency, I have personally seen that exact pattern. Does she agree the Government could look at further devolving spending on further education, higher education and apprenticeships to local areas to address those challenges?

**Lyn Brown:** Talking about the education brief is a bit beyond me this morning. I am sure the hon. Lady will understand if I just duck that and move on. I think honesty is always the best policy.

As this is a Treasury debate, I will start with a bit of Treasury stuff. May I gently say that the Government's record on the economy, and certainly on social mobility, is not at all good? Average pay is still £15 a week lower in real terms than it was before the financial crisis. Not long ago, the Government confidently predicted a minimum wage of £9 an hour by 2020, but downgrades to economic forecasts have taken their toll, and the Office for Budget Responsibility now expects it to be just £8.57. A real living wage—one based on what people actually need to live—is already higher than that. Planned statutory wage increases will not meet the burden of rising living costs. Two thirds of the children living in poverty today have parents in work.

I know this has been said before, but it is true nevertheless. In the 20th century a contract was understood in this country: each generation was better educated, and had higher incomes, greater home ownership and a longer, healthier life than the previous generation. Even if working class kids—I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Putney for introducing class into the debate—did not succeed educationally, they could still expect higher incomes than their parents, and the dream of home ownership coming into reach. That is clearly no longer the case.

The housing crisis is now one of the biggest barriers to social mobility in our big cities. My borough of Newham is ranked second worst of all local authorities in England and Wales for adult social mobility indicators,

a consequence of low pay, high living costs and insecure rented housing. The most recent quarterly statistics show, for the sixth time running, an increase in the number of households in England living in temporary accommodation and, since the end of 2010, a 75% increase in the number of children living in temporary accommodation to 120,000. Hon. Members know what a problem that is: a safe, warm, healthy and secure home is so important to childhood.

I was privileged to live in a council flat in east London.

**David Linden** *rose*—

**Lyn Brown:** It provided my family with an affordable home, and we were secure in the knowledge that if we were responsible tenants who paid their rent, it was a forever home. That security provided me with the space to learn, thrive and strive, to do as well as I could. My little sister has massively achieved and is a well-respected solicitor, and I am in this House. We could not have done that without the security of an affordable property behind us. Today, far too few of my constituents have that benefit. They live in private, insecure and expensive tenancies, with their children forced to move schools often or to travel long distances for their education. Such conditions make it so much more difficult for them to fulfil their potential.

**David Linden:** I realise now that the hon. Lady was just getting into her flight there. The whole issue of housing is something that we have not explored in the context of social mobility. I am very conscious that in the past few years in Scotland we have abolished the right to buy. That seems to be a major issue. Governments will build social housing, council housing, but it is then sold off. Does she agree with me that it is time in England for Governments and parties of all colours to look at abolishing the right to buy, just as the Labour Government are doing in Wales?

**Lyn Brown:** I am going to duck that one.

Studies at Harvard University show that growing up with the toxic stress of economic hardship in the family can be severely damaging for a child, and they conclude that it has life-long effects similar to those caused by parental drug abuse or exposure to violence in the home.

I have been in this job for a few short weeks. One of the things exercising me is the very notion of social mobility itself. I am not sure that it is the right concept, and perhaps the Education Committee is on to something with its report that stated that we need a broader concept such as social justice. I fear that the concept of social mobility can be used to promote what I call a grammar school society, where a few of us can get on but most cannot, where the few of us that succeed are held up as a beacon of equal opportunity, whereas in fact those lucky few are a testament to hard work, yes, but often quite a bit of luck, frankly. A society where a few kids from deprived families get to the Cabinet table but the vast majority face daily hardship is simply not an opportunity society.

**David Evennett:** I know that the hon. Lady is very passionate because I have worked with her on many campaigns in the past, but would she endorse today's

pledge? What she is saying might be a debate for another day, but today we are trying to get bipartisan agreement on the pledge so that we can go forward on that front.

**Lyn Brown:** I assure the right hon. Gentleman that I will work with anyone in order to improve social mobility in our country, because it is something I am absolutely passionate about.

Many of us will have seen the new research from Durham University confirming that grammar school pupils do better because they are more likely to have social advantages, not because selective education is superior. If we are to have a just society, a society in which all our talent and hard work allow us to fulfil our potential, we need to have a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach to tackling today's challenges. We cannot be satisfied with a few token programmes to help a small number of children from disadvantaged backgrounds into institutions and professions that are as dominated by privilege as ever. We cannot pretend that a few programmes amount to a strategy.

Social mobility, social inclusion or social justice are not just about school attainment and university access; as we have talked about today, unfairness persists into the workplace even for university graduates. Graduates with rich parents can earn as much as 60% more than those who have lived with the disadvantages of poverty. The gap is smaller for graduates from the most prestigious universities but, as we know, those institutions have the least inclusive intakes.

What about those who do not go to university? Where are the essential high-grade apprenticeships that this country needs, ones that mean we can be equally proud of the graduates of apprenticeships as of academia? Do we not need to challenge the bias that pervades post-16 education and learning so as to secure social mobility and inclusion to provide the skills base that this country needs for the 21st century?

Any social inclusion, social justice or social mobility policy must address increasing wealth inequality. It must also address the shocking gap in productivity and economic opportunities between our global cities and our smaller towns and coastal and rural communities which have been held back by our existing economic model. As a society, we cannot afford to continue with an economic model that promotes a minority of our people while the rest are denied investment. Labour is determined to embed greater equality, wider opportunity and shared prosperity right across the country. Shared prosperity is our goal—to coin a phrase—to create a society for the many and not the few.

10.46 am

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Davies.

May I say how grateful we all are that my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) secured this debate? She has done so on the back of an outstanding record in government, including at the highest level. She brings to our debates a burning strength within her as to the importance of social mobility.

During this debate a number of Members have referred to their backgrounds, which have informed in many ways the views they have reached on social mobility and

[*Mel Stride*]

their desire to do something about it. My parents left school at the ages of 15 and 14 because of economic hardship, and the thought of them ever having become a doctor or a scientist, or even having gone to university, is about as fanciful as any one of us stepping on the surface of the moon. It would have been entirely and utterly impossible. My great break in life was when I got a free place at the grammar school, and I took that opportunity and never looked back. I therefore share with many of those present the burning drive to do something about the issues that we have discussed.

We can all agree that far. The question is, how do we approach these issues? As has been evident in the debate, many different strands are involved. The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) mentioned housing, for example, which is one component. There are of course many other components, but I will focus on a couple of key areas, if I may, because they relate to the worthy and outstanding initiative launched today by my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney: educational skills, and the economy and business.

We should not overlook the progress we have made, in particular on education and skills, some of it on my right hon. Friend's watch. We now have 1.9 million more children in good and outstanding schools than we had in 2010, and a record number of young people in education and training. We have more disabled and disadvantaged young people going to university than at any time in our history. We have driven up standards right across the piece. There is no point in getting people into education and training unless we give them good education and training that will be useful to get them work in future. We are achieving that: the EBacc is driving up standards and we have opened up access, particularly in the case of our great universities.

We recognise that we need to do more, so we recently invested £72 million in the 12 opportunity areas across the country, with £50 million allocated to early language and literature skills and £250 million to technical education. We have delivered £406 million for education and skills within the industrial strategy, particularly focusing on maths, digital skills and technology. My right hon. Friend mentioned apprenticeships and T-levels; there have been 3 million new apprenticeship starts since 2010 and 1.2 million since 2005.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) mentioned the importance of not writing people off early in their career and the idea of lifelong learning. We are launching our national retraining scheme to ensure that we have upskilling at the centre of our offer. He mentioned the economy, and there is no doubt that providing a strong economy and employment is the best way to get people moving up in society and, in particular, avoiding poverty.

**Peter Kyle:** There are a lot of things I would like to comment on, but the Minister mentions the economy; is it not true that we live in a world where if someone is born into a family that has assets, they are almost certain to succeed in life, but if they are talent-rich but asset-poor they are not? What will the Minister do to restructure the economy so that those born into families who do not own property and do not have savings have a much better chance of success?

**Mel Stride:** On the specific issue of wealth, the hon. Gentleman will find that income inequality is at its lowest level for about 30 years. If he looks at the tax system, which includes property and assets, as he will know, the top 1% of earners in this country pay 28% of income tax. He will know that the national living wage is being increased by 4.4% as of this month with the start of a new tax year, and he will know that the very lowest-paid in our country have had a real-terms pay increase of 7% since 2015. I hope Members will recognise that the Government are on the side of the poorest in our society and are actively engaged in dealing with those issues.

**David Linden:** Will the Minister put on the record once again that the national living wage does not extend to under-25s?

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Gentleman and I have been in several debates where he has raised exactly that point time after time, and I am grateful to him for raising it again. There is an element of affordability to that; there is also the fact that there is a minimum wage, which we are increasing through time, for those who are under 25. We have been able to provide the above-inflation increase to the national living wage because our stewardship of the economy has allowed us to. The problem with some of the prescriptions that we hear is that they are big on spending and borrowing money and increasing taxation, and I am afraid that is just not a recipe for being able to make the kind of progress on the national living wage that this Government have been making.

I will move on to the overall economic progress that we have made as a Government. We have a near record level of employment in our country; we have more women in work than at any time in our history; and we have virtually the lowest level of unemployment for 45 years—youth unemployment is down by 40% since 2010. We have had five years of continuous growth, and the deficit and the debt are both falling.

**Sarah Champion:** I recognise the things that the Minister mentions, and of course they are to be welcomed, but we are talking about young people's aspiration not just to get a part-time job in the corner shop but to become an MP, a judge or a surgeon. Surely that is what we are lacking, and that is why I hope he supports the pledge of the right hon. Member for Putney.

**Mel Stride:** I do not disagree with the hon. Lady, but my point is that unless there is a successful economy, with jobs, growth and all the things that this Government are delivering, it becomes more and more difficult to provide social mobility. This Government are providing all the things that I have outlined, and that is driving social mobility.

The way that the economy is managed has an important impact on poverty, which, as we know, is one of the greatest evils that hold people back. Since 2010 we have a million fewer people in absolute low income—a record low. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) raised the issue of child poverty; we have 300,000 fewer children in absolute low income. There are 200,000 fewer pensioners in absolute income poverty and 500,000 fewer adults of working age in absolute low income since 2010. In fact, of the 28 EU member

states, our country has the fifth lowest level of persistent poverty. That is not the same as saying that where we are is acceptable or that we do not have to do more, but we should recognise that progress is being made.

Doing more is right at the heart of what my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney suggests. The Government warmly welcome her initiative; she rightly said that a lack of social mobility leads to talent going to waste. I totally endorse that. She referred to the important link between productivity and social mobility, a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) also raised. It is a simple fact that living standards can increase dramatically if we get productivity right. In fact, if we had the same level of productivity in our country as there is in Germany, our economy would be 30% larger than it is. I am wholeheartedly with her on that.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Putney also raised the issue of Brexit and talked about the freedoms that will come with it as a moment for change. That was an apposite and far-sighted point to make. She urged companies to engage in her social mobility pledge, focusing on partnerships with schools and work experience. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (David Evennett) spoke passionately about his work experience when he was a younger man—or should I say an even younger man—than he is today.

On companies' recruitment practices, my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney raised the issue of name-blind applications and the work that Clifford Chance has done, as well as the contextual recruitment carried out by Deloitte, Linklaters and others, which takes into account applicants' backgrounds as well as the contents of their curriculum vitae. If I may paraphrase her, it is a case of employers being blind to everything but someone's suitability to do the job. We can all unite around that. She also raised the important matter of degree apprenticeships and made an interesting point about how the apprenticeship levy is used and whether it could be directed in ways that may be more helpful to the issues that we are debating.

My right hon. Friend raised the important point of how we measure social mobility and human capital. Personally, I think that is an area that would be worthy of greater attention. I do not believe that the Office for National Statistics or any other such bodies produce such statistics, and it may well be worth us looking at that more closely. She raised the importance of working with others, such as companies in our constituencies and organisations such as the CBI, the FSB and the others that she has already brought on board, for which I give her huge credit.

It may be impossible to discuss such a deep and important issue as social mobility without being partisan, and almost inevitably there have been elements of partisanship in the debate. But my right hon. Friend should be congratulated on at least uniting us in spirit on an issue that we are all determined to confront. She left us with a powerful legacy from her time as Secretary of State for Education. I have a feeling that there is far more to come from her; that she is far from finished in her drive for a fairer and better world, with social mobility beating alive, loud and whole at its heart, and I thank her for bringing forward this debate.

10.59 am

**Justine Greening:** I simply want to finish the debate by thanking all hon. Members who have taken the time to contribute. For me, social mobility is something that we have never had in this country; it is not about this Government or the one before. It is a structural deficit on opportunity that has persisted for decades and we need to recognise that. The sooner we realise that we need to raise our sights and work cross-party on this, while reserving the right to have a debate on resourcing and policy, the better, because one of the reasons things do not change is that there is not enough longevity to our approach.

I hope that over the coming months and years, we can really improve the evidence base on this issue, because the more that can inform our policy, the more successful we will be.

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).*

## Leaving the EU: Legal Services

11 am

**Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered promotion of legal services after the UK leaves the EU.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the important issue of the future of UK legal services and how they are promoted after we leave the European Union.

The best way to set out the significance of this matter is to recite some facts about the legal service sector's contribution to the UK economy and beyond. In 2016, legal activities added £24.4 billion to the UK's national accounts. That is around 1.4% of the UK's total gross value added. The UK legal services sector employs about 344,000 people. Most of those jobs are outside London, but of course the City of London has a huge hub of specialist lawyers who support the financial services sector. English law is the most widely used in the world, covering some 27% of the world's 320 legal jurisdictions. More than 200 foreign law firms from more than 40 jurisdictions—all the EU jurisdictions but also, obviously, some beyond the EU—have offices in the UK. In 2016, the UK legal services sector generated £31.5 billion in revenue, £4.9 billion in total exports and net trade of £4 billion. It is forecast to produce turnover of £30.82 billion and net exports of £4.25 billion by 2020.

I say all those things as a lawyer—I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—but this matter goes well beyond the law and is inextricably linked to the United Kingdom's financial and professional services sectors. Our economy is of course overwhelmingly service-based.

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): My hon. Friend described the contribution of legal services as a whole, but commercial law contributes a large amount to that annual income. I wonder whether he is happy with the arrangements for mutual recognition and enforcement of judgments after we leave the EU.

**Robert Neill:** My hon. Friend makes a very important point. At the moment, the UK is the jurisdiction of choice for the majority of commercial law contracts, litigation that follows from them, and commercial law arbitration, but we cannot take that for granted. A number of English language commercial courts that apply UK law have already been established elsewhere in the world. As I understand it, another is proposed in Amsterdam, which would clearly have an impact once we leave the EU. Mutual recognition of judgments is one of the UK legal sector's key asks, and he anticipated with great timeliness that I was about to move on to what the Law Society, the Bar Council, the City of London Corporation, TheCityUK and others in the sector are looking for from the Government to maintain the position of UK legal services once we leave the EU.

The legal services sector's key priorities are as follows. First, EU27 legal providers should be permitted to provide services in the UK, and vice versa—UK legal providers should be able to provide services in the

EU27—on the basis of mutual recognition of regulatory regimes. That would enable European lawyers based in London firms and UK lawyers based in the EU27 to continue to advise and represent their clients.

Secondly, the UK and the EU27 should continue automatic mutual recognition of legal qualifications gained before and during—and after, I submit—the UK's exit from the EU. That ought to be part of the agreement we seek. Otherwise, we would be in the perverse position that an English lawyer who, like me, is also qualified in the Republic of Ireland—I am a member of the Irish Bar—was able to continue to practise in the EU27 using their Irish qualification but not their English qualification. That is why there has been a considerable increase in the number of English solicitors being admitted to the Law Society of Ireland and English barristers seeking to be called to the Irish Bar. It would be much more sensible to retain those people in the UK as part of a mutual deal with our EU partners.

Thirdly, as my hon. Friend said, it is critical that UK court judgments can continue to be enforced in the courts of the EU27. That obviously applies to commercial law, but it also impacts maintenance payments, for example. Let us say that the partner from whom a UK national is having difficulty getting support for their child is an EU national who is living back in the EU27. Maintenance payments, like a judgment in the largest commercial litigation, can currently be enforced in any EU27 court and implemented by the authorities of any EU27 member state by virtue of our membership of the EU. One regulation covers the whole lot. It is important that we seek to preserve that arrangement. It would be extremely complicated if we had to enter into arrangements with individual EU member states, so we must try to do it en bloc.

It is also to the benefit of the EU27 to have the judgments of their courts recognised and enforced in the UK. There would be mutual advantage to preserving that arrangement, and it is most important that that is done without any break in continuity. Contracts of all manners are being entered into that, in all likelihood, will run beyond the date on which we leave the European Union. It is essential that people can enter into such contracts with sufficient certainty that they will be enforceable throughout the transition period and in the end state after we leave.

It is suggested that, as well as seeking the broadest possible deal with the European Union on that, the UK should consider re-signing The Hague convention as an independent party. I suggest that the two are complementary—it is not either/or. We are currently a party to that convention by virtue of our membership of the EU, but that will no longer be the case once we leave. I ask the Minister to take on board the concern that, in the negotiations, we should seek a waiver from the EU to allow us to re-sign as an independent party prior to Brexit so that there is no delay in ratification.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case, and I entirely agree with him about The Hague convention, but does he agree that the great prize would be replicating the provisions of the recast Brussels I regulation, which derives from EU regulation 1215/2012? That is the gold standard. It is the best option, and The Hague convention is very much a fall-back provision.

**Robert Neill:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right—he and my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) will be aware of the work that the Select Committee on Justice has done in this respect—which is why the first option should be to get a deal for continued mutual recognition. The Hague convention is, in a sense, a fall-back. It is not either/or—we could do the two in parallel, in the same way that we are seeking a generous agreement in relation to Euratom but also looking at the fall-back position of making our own regulatory arrangements if need be—but it would be much better if we maintained the existing mutual recognition. The Select Committee stressed that clearly in the report we published towards the end of the last Parliament on the impact of Brexit for the justice system, including legal services.

There are other key matters to stress, including the need for a system that deals with the ability of the UK to attract talent, which applies to the legal services sector. It applies to all the professions, but in the service economy our great strength is the quality of the personnel we are able to attract to the UK. Any immigration regime should therefore be so organised as to make it possible for firms easily to move staff between offices in the EU27 and the UK, and vice versa. It is also important that, as I have indicated, as well as recognition of qualifications, all existing UK lawyers practising EU law in the European Union should be able to continue to do so, and vice versa. Those are essential matters.

It is also important that we avoid any barriers and friction, to use a popular phrase, that might arise by virtue of any regulatory difficulties. Depending on our arrangements, if we do not have a comprehensive agreement and a proper partnership with mutual recognition and access, UK law firms could face restrictive regulations, preventing them from providing services and involving about 30 different regimes. We can see the complexity for firms if we do not get that solution. That is why it is important that the Government make it clear to the legal services sector that it is a priority in the negotiations.

When we talk about services, we sometimes understandably pay a lot of attention to the financial services sector, which is the biggest and most valuable part of our service economy, but the legal services sector is the critical underpinner of that sector. People come to the UK because our banks are sound and dependable, our regulatory system is perceived internationally as sound and dependable, and our legal system is seen as being second-to-none sound and dependable. It is a place where people want to litigate, and want to have their contracts written in English law. We cannot take any of that for granted.

None of that precludes us from using the opportunities that come as we leave the EU to seek to expand British legal services elsewhere in the world. It is important that the Government build on the “GREAT” campaign, with which the Ministry of Justice was associated last year. I hope it will be made clear that legal services, as a key British specialism and area of British excellence, will be a central part of the drive we make going forward. That is not always easy. In fact, even in common law jurisdictions adopting broadly similar laws to ours, including many Commonwealth countries, considerable restrictive practices get in the way of British law firms and lawyers operating. For example, the British Bar and

the Law Society have been fighting extremely hard to get access to the legal markets in India.

India is talked of as one of the great potential commercial prizes for a free trade agreement post-Brexit, but it is by no means easy. India currently has protective regulatory structures. Progress is being made in parts of the financial services sector, but India has been reluctant to open up its legal services. When we negotiate trade deals, we should not be thinking purely in terms of manufactures or financial services—it is most desirable that legal services can be sold as part of a package that goes with the other services, and sometimes with manufactures. For example, many people will have bought a car with an attached insurance policy. When something is exported, it may have an insurance policy attached. It makes sense if lawyers who specialise in that field can advise their clients in those new markets.

There are opportunities, but a joined-up approach is required, particularly between the Ministry and the Department for Exiting the European Union. I am delighted to see my hon. and learned Friend the Minister in her place, who I know understands this well, having had distinguished practice at the Bar in the UK, but there is sometimes concern that other Departments are not as well sighted on the needs of the legal services sector, which sometimes perceives that it takes a fight to get itself heard in the broader Brexit negotiations discussion.

I hope the Minister will reassure us and take from the debate the message that there needs to be a specific taskforce for dealing with legal services. Many people in British law firms are ready and willing to supplement the Government’s in-house lawyers on policy advice. Established organisations such as the Financial Markets Law Committee, chaired by the noble Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd, have made a number of suggestions to the Government on technical but important regulatory changes that will be necessary to protect the position of financial law.

There is expertise, but I have a suspicion that it is not always obvious to look outside the traditional civil service ranks for advice—perhaps it is sometimes the nature of Government—I remember this from when I was a Minister. I hope the Government do that right across the piece on Brexit, because we have great expertise. The Bar European Group has equal levels of great expertise.

I hope that, in this short debate, I have flagged up some of the key needs of British legal services, their legal service providers and their clients—not just commercial clients but the little people who benefit from access to European markets. I know that the Minister is engaged and will respond positively, but the more specific detail she can give on how the Government will address those specific items, the better that will reassure the sector and its clients.

11.17 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. It is also a pleasure to hear the debate brought about by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) and the contributions made by the other members of the Justice Committee. That Committee is doing a huge amount of work to ensure that the issues that matter in our justice

[Lucy Frazer]

system are brought to the forefront and to Ministers to ensure that we have the best possible justice system going forward.

Today, as always, my hon. Friend highlighted important issues that affect us in relation to Brexit. Like him, I acknowledge the important work done by our legal services sector. By reference to points similar to his, there are four key points. The first is jobs, and the legal services sector is the source of many jobs. As he rightly mentioned, it employs well over 300,000 people.

Secondly, the sector contributes significantly to our economy: £24 billion every year. As my hon. Friend highlighted, that money is brought in by not just the legal services sector but its interdependency and relationship with the financial services sector. He mentioned TheCityUK, whose CEO, Miles Celic, highlighted that very point. He said:

“The UK-based legal services sector forms an integral and crucial part of the wider financial and related professional services ecosystem which makes the UK a truly globally-leading international financial centre.”

The legal services sector does not only those things but so much more. It supports people when they are most vulnerable. Many lawyers give up their time to support others for free through the Bar Pro Bono Unit and LawWorks, and I was pleased to see the launch in 2014 of the UK collaborative plan for pro bono, with more than 40 firms committing 325,000 hours a year to support the most vulnerable.

Our sector is so successful because we have outstanding professionals. We have a well-established system of law and a first-class judiciary, whose expertise and impartiality is recognised throughout the world. For those reasons, my hon. Friend is right to say that we need to protect this sector post Brexit, and we are doing that in a number of ways.

My hon. Friends the Members for Henley (John Howell), for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), and for Bromley and Chislehurst referred to the importance of mutual recognition and the enforcement of judgments. I hope that in our withdrawal agreement we will soon reach an agreement on the protection of and mutual recognition of judgments, and on separation for cases that are pending and currently before the courts.

**Alex Chalk:** I am encouraged to hear that. Some of the evidence presented to the inquiry stressed that if we get such an agreement right, there is a great opportunity for a springboard, particularly in east Asia, where there is a lot of work that British lawyers can seek to win. However, that will require that sound foundation of mutual recognition of judgments, and mutual enforceability.

**Lucy Frazer:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and it is important to give certainty to the legal services sector, so that they can advise their clients accordingly. My point was about the withdrawal agreement and what will happen to cases that are already pending before the court. The second stage of our negotiation was about implementation, and we have given businesses legal certainty by ensuring that our current arrangements will continue to apply during the implementation period. We are starting to negotiate and come to an arrangement on what will happen in future after we leave the EU.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham was right when he mentioned the gold standard and the Brussels regulation, and my hon. Friend the Member for Henley was correct to identify the importance of the Hague convention. Both those things are important, and we hope to secure the Hague convention as a minimum. It is right to ensure that there will be no gap before we rejoin that convention, and we are pressing to secure that. Our ambition and aim is to negotiate as hard as possible and ensure arrangements and protections in future that are similar to those we currently have.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst raised the important question of legal services, the right of citizens to practise here and abroad, and the mutual recognition of qualifications. Again, on separation, as part of the withdrawal agreement we have agreed that any lawyers within the scope of the citizens' rights agreement who have become part of the host profession in the member state should remain recognised and able to practise. Last week we agreed the terms of the implementation period, in which we will have the same rules as now. Therefore, rules on market access will continue, including on the provision of services and establishments for lawyers. The Government are keen to ensure a good deal for the legal services sector in future.

**Robert Neill:** I am glad to hear the Minister say that, and I am sure she will recognise that for the legal services sector, a CETA-type deal simply is no good. For legal services, a CETA-type deal is no deal. When we seek an ambitious deal, we must go beyond that which has been posited by some as a solution, because CETA would be just as bad as the cliff edge, which I think the Minister and I, and the Government, do not wish for under any circumstances.

**Lucy Frazer:** My hon. Friend makes an important point, but we can see how the Prime Minister is approaching this. In her Mansion House speech she specifically said that it makes sense for us to continue to recognise qualifications in future, and she identified the importance of civil and judicial co-operation. She specifically identified a few areas where the UK and EU economies are linked, and one of those was law.

As my hon. Friend rightly identified, our opportunity to expand our legal services extends not just to the EU, and we also have the opportunity to develop free trade agreements with third countries, which may cover legal services. He was right, however, to say that protectionism already exists in other countries, and although few FTAs currently cover legal services, we hope and are ambitious to change that in the future.

It is not only in the Brexit discussions that we continue to support our legal profession, and considering LawTech, technology, and innovation in legal services is key to ensuring that the United Kingdom retains its world-leading status. That is why the Government, building on success in the FinTech sector, are ensuring that new and innovative legal technologies are embraced and supported. We are fully supportive of LawTech innovation, which is now gathering pace. The number of LawTech start-ups in the UK is increasing each year, from three in 2010, to more than 60 in 2016. We are committed to ensuring that the UK becomes a world leader in smart contracts, and we are keen to bring together work that is being done to make those contracts a reality.

We are doing other significant work beyond the UK to support and promote legal services abroad. We are joining up with the judiciary and legal services sector, helping it to gain footholds in new markets, and proactively spreading the message about why English law, and the legal offering in the UK, is so strong. My hon. Friend rightly referred to the GREAT campaign, and the “Legal Services are GREAT” campaign was launched by Lord Keen in Singapore last year. The campaign targets stronger links with emerging and established markets across the world, and it aims to cement the UK’s reputation as the world’s pre-eminent legal centre. It is showcasing the very best of what the UK’s legal services sector has to offer, bringing business to the UK and our legal firms, chambers and courts.

We are also working with partners to target the countries that matter to the UK. In April we will deliver an English law summit in Kazakhstan, alongside the Law Society and the Bar Council in England and Wales. In May, our campaign will feature in the UK pavilion of the Silk Road Expo in Xi’an, China. We are working bilaterally with our key allies on areas of mutual interest. Legal services feature prominently in the regular programme of bilateral ministerial meetings that we organise, including last year with Ministers from Singapore, India, Australia and China.

My hon. Friend made a number of important points, and we must recognise the importance of talent, and the mutual recognition of qualifications and judgments. He rightly said that there is a wealth of knowledge in the legal services sector, and the Department is using that. I greatly welcome the expertise that that sector brings to ensuring not just a good justice system, but the right deal on Brexit in the future. My hon. Friend also mentioned intergovernmental Department contributions, and the importance of other Departments appreciating the significance of the legal sector. I assure

him that I am already talking to my counterparts in the Department for Exiting the European Union and the Treasury to identify the importance of the legal services sector. Yesterday I gave evidence with a legally qualified Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Suella Fernandes), and having heard her give that evidence, I am confident that she is very much aware of the importance of our legal sector.

In conclusion, our overall message is simple: the UK is, and will continue to be, one of the pre-eminent legal centres in the world. We will continue to be a leading player, and I am determined to ensure that English law remains the law of choice, and that the UK continues to be the jurisdiction of choice.

**Robert Neill:** I welcome the Minister’s positive remarks. On work within Government, can she assure us that maximum effort will be made to join up the work of the legal services working group, which exists within the Ministry of Justice, and the Brexit Law Committee, which reports to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy? The profession is concerned that there should be no disjuncture between the two. It sounds as if the Minister and the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union have been talking, but it is important that that happens consistently at official and professional level.

**Lucy Frazer:** That is a good point that I am happy to take forward. It has been helpful for me to air these points today, and once again I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate, and indeed all hon. Members on their contributions today.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.29 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## GP Recruitment and Retention

[MRS MADELEINE MOON *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

**Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered recruitment and retention of GPs.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon—for the first time, I believe. I am grateful for the opportunity to hold this debate on an issue of critical importance to all our constituents.

General practitioners are the cornerstone of the health service in this country. The work they do on a daily basis is vital to the nation's wellbeing. As the first point of contact for people with physical or mental health problems, they have a unique duty of care within the NHS. From newborn babies to our elderly citizens, the continuity of care that they provide from cradle to grave puts them at the heart of communities up and down the country, and the lifelong relationship they build with their patients as a result is unique. We in this House must do our best to protect and promote that relationship in any way we can. That is one reason why I am holding today's debate.

I also sought this debate out of increasing concern for the state of general practice in my constituency and the wider north-east. Since entering the House in 2010 I have noticed a marked increase in the number of constituents getting in touch to raise concerns about the amount of time it has taken them to see their family doctor. It was on the back of those concerns that I began to survey my constituents on waiting times at their local GP practice. That survey is ongoing, but the results that have come in over the last year are concerning. When asked how long they had to wait for an appointment to see their GP regarding a routine matter, over 30% of those who responded to my survey said it took more than two weeks, and 15% said it took even longer. Waiting times for urgent care were equally concerning, with over 30% waiting more than 24 hours for an appointment. The growing difficulty in accessing GP services is clearly having a knock-on effect on the rest of the health service in my area.

**Thelma Walker** (Colne Valley) (Lab): Due to staff shortages in a local GP surgery, one of my constituents in the Colne Valley was referred to our local hospital for a blood test. They had a 30-minute drive each way and a two-hour wait for the test to take place. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a warning sign that general practice is struggling to cope with extra pressures and less money?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am sure the experience of my hon. Friend's constituent is happening up and down the country. We want to ensure that people can access quality healthcare close to home. It is neither cost-effective nor in the best interest of patients to have to travel further to hospital for things that could be dealt with more readily within a GP's practice.

More and more local people are telling me that they have to attend accident and emergency to get the treatment they need, because they cannot get an appointment with their GP or their local practice is closed when they

need it. We saw record numbers at Sunderland Royal Hospital A&E this winter, when the entire NHS was stretched to breaking point. It is extremely worrying in that context that so many people are turning to emergency services simply to access the care that family doctors might ordinarily provide.

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): The hon. Lady has made a brilliant start to her speech. I did a similar survey to the one she describes in my own constituency, and I found that access to GPs was almost instantaneous provided that people did not specify the GP they wanted to see. My own practice consists of a number of GPs. I think the results are patchy around the country. Is this not a time to look at the old partnership structure of GPs, to avoid the situation where a young doctor has to find £100,000 or £200,000 in order to go into practice?

**Bridget Phillipson:** The hon. Gentleman raises a fair point about patchiness, and I hope the Minister will be able to respond to it in his summing-up. There are big regional variations, and differences even within cities and towns, and we need to try to even out access to general practice. He raises an important point about routes into the profession and the barriers that they sometimes place in the way of those seeking to work in general practice, and I hope the Minister will say a bit more about what the Department will seek to do to take away some of those barriers.

**Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): In my constituency, just yesterday, a practice in Hightown that had been earmarked for closure was saved at the eleventh hour thanks to a vigorous campaign by residents, the local authority and the parish council. Does the experience of Hightown, which is no doubt repeated elsewhere, not show that the damage done by the reorganisation of the NHS from 2010 onwards has caused real problems in GP services up and down the country, and that the Government need to get their act together and address the shortage of GPs for communities in all our constituencies?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am happy to hear that my hon. Friend was successful in his campaign, but we are seeing closures and mergers of practices across the country, and we need a much broader solution. It should not fall only to local campaign groups or local NHS managers to try to put right some of the broader systemic problems in our health service.

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech about not just patchiness but the consistent pattern we see across the country. It is not simply down to people being too picky about who their GP is. In Scotland we have seen the number of GP practices fall from 1,029 when the Scottish National party came into power in 2007 to just 956. We have seen the number of GPs increase by only 1% in Scotland, but the size of GP practice lists has increased by 7%. The root cause is one of supply and demand; we are not getting enough GPs to come into the sector when more and more are retiring all the time.

**Bridget Phillipson:** I agree with my hon. Friend and I am sure his constituency, in common with mine, has significant problems with industrial illness and long-standing

health problems, which means that we do not need just the national average number of GPs, or just enough to get by. To deal with the health need we face in the local population, we need a much better service to ensure that we drive down some of the health inequalities that most seriously affect communities such as mine and, I am sure, his.

More generally, constituents are also worried that changes to the GP workforce at their local practice are producing a less effective service. Many are concerned by rates of retirement, especially among family doctors with whom they have built up a close relationship over many years. They also believe that the overall decline in the number of family-run practices resulting from retirements is damaging the continuity of care they expect from their local practice.

On the securing of timely appointments, constituents who work full time are frustrated by restrictive booking systems and a lack of availability in the evenings and at weekends. Others complain that constraints in the system mean that the 10-minute consultation period is so strictly enforced that multiple appointments are necessary just to outline the problems that they face. Their frustration grows if they cannot see the same doctor on each occasion and have to repeat the same problems time and again.

There is a general sense among my constituents, and indeed in the comments posted on the House of Commons Facebook page ahead of this debate, that the pressures on general practice will only increase as more new homes are built in communities where public services are already under pressure.

**Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that the pressures have been compounded by the ageing population, by retirements and by an increase in expectations? Does she welcome the new hospital schools announced this week?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I will touch on all the points the hon. Lady raises as I continue through my contribution.

I am clear that addressing the housing crisis in our country should be an absolute priority for the Government, but I argue that building thousands of new homes without ensuring that the necessary infrastructure is in place to meet increased demand on health, transport and education services would be a recipe for disaster. Poorly planned housing developments that do not take account of local need will only undermine public confidence in supporting a housing revolution in this country.

It is not just our constituents who are concerned about the deteriorating state of general practice in the north-east. Just over 18 months ago I was contacted by the Sunderland local medical committee about the findings of a confidential survey of local GPs and practice managers, which showed that almost half of those surveyed had seen a large increase in their workload and a further 31% reported an increase to unsustainable levels. Although two thirds of practices had attempted to recruit new family doctors, many had found recruitment difficult, and a majority reported that patient care had been adversely affected by the failure to recruit and retain GPs, the increasing workload that imposed on existing GPs and the significant reduction in core funding allocated to their practices. As a result, 60% of Sunderland GPs and practice managers said that their practice was

viable only for between one and three years, with many local doctors considering early retirement or a career change.

That survey highlighted the profound problems at the heart of general practice in Sunderland, further evidence of which was laid bare in statistics I requested from the Department of Health later in 2016. Those figures showed not only a shocking 25% reduction in the number of full-time equivalent GPs in the NHS Sunderland clinical commissioning group area between 2013 and 2015 but also an accelerating rate of decline from one year to the next. The way in which full-time equivalent GP numbers were measured changed in 2015, but the new methodology shows a continued decline of 9% in the Sunderland CCG area between September 2015 and December 2017.

I am sorry to say that the most recent figures for other parts of the north-east make for even more painful reading. In the Hartlepool and Stockton-on-Tees CCG area there was a 15% drop in numbers over the last two years. In the South Tees CCG area it was 14.9%. In the Darlington CCG area it was 13%, and in the Durham Dales, Easington and Sedgefield CCG area it was also 13%. I could go on, but it is obvious that the exodus of family doctors from the profession is having a serious impact on the number of hours being made available for general practice in our region.

As a result, the demand on family doctors who continue to soldier on is intensifying. Not one practice in my area has a lower ratio of patients to full-time equivalent GPs than the England average of 1,738:1. In fact, each and every practice is consistently and significantly above that. The situation will be similar, if not worse, in other parts of the north-east.

Coupled with the plummeting number of full-time equivalent GPs is the similarly concerning decline in the number of GP practices in the area, from 53 in 2013 to just 40 today. I accept that there are merits to the argument that consolidating practices makes them more sustainable in the long term by creating larger patient lists. However, it is really important to remember that practice closures can leave behind big holes in communities.

**Ross Thomson** (Aberdeen South) (Con): In Scotland we face a shortage of 1,000 GPs by 2021. Torry medical practice in my constituency has really struggled to fill vacancies and decided to end its contract with the NHS at the end of July. The practice is vital to the area, and thousands of my constituents rely on its services. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Scottish Government should seriously consider ways in which they can attract more medical students to Scotland?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Attracting medical students to areas of the country with the greatest need is important. That is something I have been seeking to do, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman will continue to make that case as well.

**Rosie Cooper** (West Lancashire) (Lab): I am absolutely delighted that Edge Hill University in my constituency has just been granted a medical school. Does my hon. Friend, or indeed the Minister, have any view on how to retain the doctors who will train there and ensure that they can practise in the area? Lancashire has seen the largest fall in the number of GPs of any county since

[Rosie Cooper]

2015—it is nearly 10% down. We need solutions to make areas attractive in order to retain the medical students who train there.

**Bridget Phillipson:** My hon. Friend is entirely right. I will say a bit more about Sunderland's successful bid for a medical school—a number of parts of the country have benefited from those new schools. She will no doubt accept that this is part of a much longer-term solution to resolving the crisis we face. Meanwhile, we need action from Ministers to deal with some of the short-term pressures on local services.

The most vulnerable patients, who already find it difficult to get to their local practice, will undoubtedly be further inconvenienced if that practice moves further away. The creation of larger super-practices also risks breaking the critical link between family doctors and the patients they serve. In any case, the national and local strategic push for larger practices appears to be having little impact on GP numbers, as I have sought to make abundantly clear.

I do not believe that we can go on like this. We should rightly celebrate that people are living longer, which is in part a testament to the world-class care that the NHS provides, but we need to acknowledge that an ageing population with increasingly complex long-term care needs is likely to put further pressure on GP services in years to come. The British Medical Association is clear that general practice in England is under unprecedented pressure to deliver more support to patients with fewer resources. As the problems grow increasingly severe, GPs are being forced to test their resilience beyond reasonable limits and to confront issues from a multitude of directions.

I am deeply concerned that eight out of 10 GPs feel unable to deliver safe care; that seven in 10 feel that patient access to services has decreased of late; and that six in 10 have reported a rise in their stress levels. There is a workload limit beyond which we cannot reasonably expect family doctors to go. Given that more than half are now considering the temporary suspension of new patient registrations to ease the burden, it seems that we are close to that point.

If we are to address the crisis in general practice, we must first consider the factors that drive it. The Sunderland CCG practice area is grappling with several problems that I am sure will be familiar to GPs in other parts of the country. I have mentioned the long-term challenge of coping with an ageing population that has longer and more complex care needs, but that is coupled with rising public expectations of what their local general practice should be able to deliver. Let me be clear: demands for flexibility in terms of evening and weekend opening hours are not unreasonable at a time when so many people work during the week. After all, public services must be responsive to how people live their lives. That said, it is inevitable that offering round-the-clock access to GP practices will increase the pressure on existing workloads unless more family doctors come into the system.

Unfortunately, the opposite is happening in my area, where there are significant issues with recruitment not only of GPs, but of nurses and other healthcare professionals. Meanwhile, existing GPs and practice

managers are dealing with additional work moving from hospitals into the community without associated funding. Added to that is the increased pressure on budgets resulting from rising estate costs from NHS Property Services, and the fact that the percentage of the NHS budget allocated to general practice has not kept pace with the rest of the health service. Finally, the cost of medical indemnity for GPs has risen significantly in recent years, pushing up the cost of insurance and making some work, especially unscheduled care, prohibitively expensive for GPs.

We therefore have a perfect storm of pressures on general practice that is driving experienced family doctors from the profession, with a third of GPs in the Sunderland CCG area considering retirement in the next five years. The dramatic fall in the number of GP partners over the last year should also come as no shock given the increasing responsibilities of running a practice where income is falling but workload is rising. In that context, it is easy to understand why more and more experienced GPs are opting for locum work instead, which allows them to work set hours with a set fee to a very specific set of tasks.

However, the cost to the NHS of this shift in culture cannot be measured only in financial terms, although that is certainly a major concern. As I mentioned earlier, the closure of a local practice is often devastating for a local community and can leave the most vulnerable patients with less access to the long-term care they need.

The crisis in GP retention therefore needs to be urgently addressed, and I ask the Minister to explain what the Government are doing to stem the flow of GPs quitting the workforce or rejecting partnerships. The GP retention scheme has proved a popular way to help family doctors who are considering leaving the profession to remain in work for a reduced number of sessions, but the Government simply must do more to ease their workload if they are serious about their commitment to attract and retain at least an extra 5,000 GPs in England.

On the other side of the coin is recruitment. Given the challenges for retention I have outlined, improving recruitment is critical if the general practice forward view target of increasing the number of GPs by 5,000 by 2020 is to be met. The BMA has warned that that target looks increasingly unachievable without a significant increase in the number of doctors through the expanded international GP recruitment programme.

Sunderland CCG is part of the NHS Cumbria and North East submission to that programme, and at least four local practices have expressed an interest in hosting a minimum of 10 GPs. In addition, the CCG is running other schemes to attract more family doctors, such as the GP career start scheme, the golden hello scheme and the GP bursary, yet whatever additions those can make to the workforce will clearly be insufficient to address the long-term drop in the number of hours made available for general practice in our area, with the number of full-time equivalent GPs falling from 201 in 2013 to just 139 in December last year. I know that the methodology for measuring that number has changed, but it is evident, whatever way the figures are measured, that there are simply not enough new doctors coming on stream to plug the ever-widening gap in service need in Sunderland.

I hope the Minister will take responsibility for this situation, and that he will agree that this is a national crisis, rather than an issue to be dealt with by local NHS managers. He will be aware that, in addition to the GP shortages we have discussed, the most recent figures show more than 100,000 NHS posts currently lying vacant—this is before we have even left the European Union.

What assessment has he made of the impact of Brexit on EU workers in the NHS, and does he agree that the Government's increasingly hostile attitude towards migrants from both inside and outside the EU risks exacerbating the jobs crisis within the NHS at a critical moment? Rather than creating a hostile environment, should the Government not celebrate those who have come to our country to keep our NHS going, and who have made such a fantastic contribution to our health service since its inception?

I hope the Minister will at least acknowledge the problems that the north-east faces in recruiting new medical students into general practice. We in the House have a duty to confront those challenges and to support creative efforts to help the NHS to attract more students into the profession in the areas of greatest need. That is why I was so delighted by the news last week that the University of Sunderland was successful in its bid to set up a new medical school. My hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) and I supported the bid, because the school will focus specifically on addressing workforce need in general practice and psychiatry in the north-east. It will deliver an additional 150 graduates into general practice between 2024 and 2028. All the experience is that GPs tend to stay in the longer term in the areas where they train, so the creation of a dedicated medical school in Sunderland is an important development for the city and the wider area.

The bid should also be praised for seeking to widen access to medical schools by ensuring that those with the talent and motivation to succeed are encouraged to apply regardless of background or social connections. The new medical school will champion general practice as a career path for researchers, offering them opportunities to explore their chosen field of interest after their training is complete. It will focus on reflection, responsibility, leadership and motivation when recruiting students to the programme in order to identify those who are most passionate about building a career in general practice. The creation of an institute for primary care practice and a general practice society should also help to foster communities of practice that will last for many years to come.

I have every confidence that the new medical school will play an important role in addressing health inequalities across the north-east in the long term, while improving social mobility in the region. I therefore wish it every success and hope that other medical schools will replicate its innovative approach to attracting talented students from less advantaged backgrounds into medicine and, specifically, general practice. I want to take this opportunity to thank all those who were involved in putting together the bid, especially Professor Scott Wilkes and Vice-Chancellor Shirley Atkinson. Without their determination, dedication and leadership, the bid would never have succeeded. They deserve a great deal of credit.

We can all agree that training new family doctors in this country is the most sensible and sustainable way to improve recruitment and retention in general practice in

the long term, but that will do nothing to address the immediate crisis facing the GP workforce. I have already discussed some of the programmes that have been put in place to meet the target of 5,000 new GPs by 2020, and I agree with the BMA that it is encouraging that the number of GPs entering training has risen for the third year in a row. However, as I mentioned, those gains are being offset by the fact that many existing GPs are choosing to work less or retire completely because of rising workload pressures. Furthermore, the BMA is clear that the overall intake for GP training places still falls far short of the Health Education England target.

Nowhere is the problem more apparent than in the north-east, where the fill rate for GP specialty training vacancies last year was just 77%. That is by far the worst rate in England and it is nothing new. Two years ago, for example, the north-east fill rate was a shocking 62%, which at the time was the lowest in the whole country. There is a real problem in relation to general practice in the region that has some of the most acute health inequalities in the country. Sunderland, South Tyneside and Hartlepool are ranked in the top 20 of 326 local authorities for bad or very bad health, and Sunderland has some of the worst health metrics in the UK for diabetes, hypertension, respiratory disease and many other health conditions. Setting aside for a second the increased demands that the forecasted ageing population will place on primary care provision, we can see that there is an urgent need for more family doctors to deliver health improvements today.

I raised this issue with senior NHS leaders during a recent session of the Public Accounts Committee, but I want to put it to the Minister again. Will he tell the House what exactly the Government are doing to ensure that the regional imbalances in GP recruitment are addressed, and how does he intend to ensure that the right people are trained in the right places? That is a crucial aspect of the challenges facing general practice in my area, and put simply, we need to know that Ministers and the Department have got a handle on it. Furthermore, will the Minister tell us whether his Department is looking at ways to open up access to medicine more broadly—not just supplementing existing provision, but looking at creating new and different ways of getting people into medicine in the way the University of Sunderland is seeking to do? Those are critical questions and they deserve concrete answers. I am sure the Minister will not disappoint.

On that note, I will draw my remarks to a close. I am sure that all hon. Members in the Chamber will agree that the challenges for general practice are significant and require a range of approaches, none of which will be quick fixes. To meet those challenges, the Government need to take a long, hard look at the things that they can do in the short, medium and long term to help to reverse the growing crisis in GP recruitment and retention. We cannot do otherwise, because this is simply too important to our constituents and to the future sustainability of our precious NHS.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair):** Order. Before calling Jim Shannon, I advise hon. Members that I intend to start calling the Front Benchers at 3.28 pm, so I expect you to divide the time accordingly. I call Jim Shannon.

2.54 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mrs Moon. I did not expect to be called quite this early, but I am very pleased to speak at any time in this Chamber, as everyone will know.

I thank the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) for setting the scene and giving us the chance to participate in the debate. Its title is “GP Recruitment and Retention”, and I am very pleased to speak on this topic. The title does not refer to a particular area, which gives me the opportunity to talk from a Northern Ireland angle—although as most hon. Members will know, that would not prevent me from speaking from a Northern Ireland angle anyway.

During the debate on the Northern Ireland Budget (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill just last week, I raised the issue of GPs, out-of-hours services and so on. I highlighted the fact that we need to improve the accessibility of GPs and enhance the capability of GP out-of-hours services to help with the immense pressure that our accident and emergency departments are under. The fact is that we are an ageing population, which increases demand on GP services, and at present we seem unable to meet the demand.

The Minister and I seem to meet in this Chamber on many occasions, and also in many Adjournment debates in the main Chamber. He is obviously a very popular Minister, but he also has a remit that includes many of the issues in which I and other hon. Members have an interest.

In Northern Ireland, this issue has certainly been a big concern. GP practices have been moving away from the old surgery system to a new system in the hope of triaging demands on doctors and surgeries. Health is a devolved matter, but I want to give a Northern Ireland perspective to this debate. Thankfully, the Department of Health’s permanent secretary in Northern Ireland has released funding for a scheme that was approved by the outgoing Minister of Health but not implemented before the untimely demise of Stormont, which is now in limbo-land. It saw the investment of an extra £3.9 million, following investment earlier in the year of £1.9 million for elective care and £3.91 million to continue the roll-out of nearly 300 practice-based pharmacists. I know that the Minister is deeply interested in this subject, not just because he is the Minister responsible for it but because he has a genuine and sincere personal interest. I hope that details from Northern Ireland might be of some help in considering what is done here on the mainland and in other parts of the United Kingdom.

The permanent secretary said at the time:

“Given the current difficult financial position, investing nearly £10m more in GP services, the largest additional investment in recent years, reflects the Department’s commitment to the continued development of sustainable and accessible primary care services... The Department is also introducing changes to...eligibility to the sickness leave scheme for GPs.”

That is another thing we have looked at in Northern Ireland, and perhaps the Minister will comment on it. The permanent secretary continued:

“It is estimated that these changes will save GPs more than £2.5m per year in sickness leave insurance premiums.”

The thrust of the debate so far, and undoubtedly of the speeches to come, is about how we can retain GPs. The

hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South clearly made that point, and I too think that that is what we need to try to do.

The move to which I have referred was made in a very uncertain political climate back home in Northern Ireland. Few other decisions to implement schemes have been taken by any Department’s permanent secretary. We are slowly moving towards what will perhaps be a hybrid system of government in Northern Ireland, whereby we can ensure that the health schemes move forward.

I have spoken to former GPs, who have illustrated to me how much the system has changed and how happy they are to retire. Some have begun to do a few hours in GP out-of-hours services, which takes a bit of pressure off the ordinary GPs, but it is important that we have a system that sustains itself, and the pressure and stress that services are under has seen most GPs walk away from that system. We are trying to stop GPs walking away—that was the point that the hon. Lady made in introducing the debate, I fully support it. The simple fact is that our doctors cannot cope and we need to help them find a new way forward.

In 2016, 36% of the 15,430 people who died in Northern Ireland were aged under 75, compared with 50% 30 years previously. The resident population of Northern Ireland rose by 10,500 people to reach 1.862 million in the year to June 2016. Every GP surgery knows that the people on their books who need the most attention are the grey vote and the young families. Our GPs are great, and we support them greatly. We understand their position—we know the pressures that they are under and we have the deepest respect for them.

One of my local surgeries has heavily invested from its own budget in a machine that can determine whether chest infections are bacterial through the practice nurse taking blood and analysing it on-site. That innovation stops the surgery sending people for analysis in hospital and facilitates the provision of better care in the GP surgery. It allows antibiotics to be prescribed and means less pressure on the hospital. Such a machine would help every surgery. Sometimes we have to look at a different way of doing things. If we can do them better, let us do that. We should be making funding for such innovations available, for the benefit of all of us across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Due to the stringent nature of benefits assessments, many practices in my area now refuse to give support letters for benefits. That is another pressure on GP surgeries all the time. I am constantly contacting GPs on behalf of my constituents, saying that they need a letter about their health condition to support their application for disability living allowance—personal independence payment, as it is now—and employment and support allowance. The GP says, “Let them write to us; we will reply,” and they do, but they usually send a list of the constituent’s appointments with the GP, which is not what PIP is about.

I am adhering to your timescale, Mrs Moon—I have worked it out, so I know what time I will have to stop.

A retired doctor I am very friendly with suggested to me—I know the Minister is sympathetic to this idea—that we have a bursary scheme whereby if a medical student will commit to doing five years or more at a surgery,

they will have some or all of their student debt written off. That would encourage people to get into GP surgeries and make a difference for five years or so. I am given to understand that the Department are looking into schemes like that, and I hope so. I am interested to hear the Minister's response to that idea, because I think that might provide encouragement for some of the young student doctors who wish to go on to general practice. If we provide that incentive through a bursary, I think it will be a massive step forward in addressing the issues, as the Department proposes to do by reducing the pressure on GPs and increasing their number.

Have any discussions taken place with the regional devolved Administrations so that they can respond? The Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), has vast knowledge of medical issues, and I know that her contribution to this debate will make clear what has been done in Scotland. Yes, it is a devolved matter, but the NHS is nationwide and this scourge in our surgeries is in every area. A focused, co-ordinated approach is the best one to take, and I ask that the Department focuses on this vastly important issue. We need good GPs, and we need to support GPs. If we do not do that, there will be a domino effect on our hospitals and all other NHS institutions. We need to encourage our first line of defence, which is GPs, and ensure that defence is sure and certain. At the moment, the fact of the matter is that it is struggling.

3.2 pm

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) on leading the debate. I will be short, because I wish to make three key points and I do not need long to do that.

First, we have a recruitment and retention problem in Stroud, like in many other parts of the country. That became apparent to me only when I was re-elected, when I talked to various of my GP friends who were keen to retire and were not necessarily finding replacements easily. It is clear that at the moment there are huge gaps in the service. However, it is not necessarily that they are not being filled, because as my hon. Friend said, locum work is very popular. That is the main point I want to make. Because locum work is so popular, we have to look at the reasons why the traditional model is not working. Even for people who become doctors, it is not necessarily a lifelong career, so for all sorts of reasons buying into a practice now is not an attractive proposition. I ask the Minister to look at what ideas are coming forward, as it is clear that the traditional practice model, where a GP buys into the assets of the practice as well as becoming a doctor there, is now of a bygone age. That particularly matters because trying to get a lead practitioner is onerous, because they are often the only full-time doctor in their practice, which puts additional responsibilities on them. I hope that we can have some flexibility in how we attract people in, otherwise there is only one direction things will go.

Secondly, the number of people who start on the route to becoming a GP but do not end up as a GP in practice is disappointing. There is something wrong both in doctoring in general, and particularly in general practice, with the number of people who fall by the

wayside. Again, as I have intimated, that is because there are attractive alternative career structures. There are ways in which people can be a GP part-time as well as doing other things, which may be commendable for someone's work-life balance but does not fill the gap. I hope the Minister will look at what is happening to recruitment patterns. We need to recognise that eight or nine years is a huge investment, so if someone does not become a GP in some form or other at the end of it, it is a wasted investment. I hope the Minister will be able to say something about how we can ensure that people follow through on their training potential.

Thirdly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South mentioned, we need to recruit a number of doctors from overseas at least in the short run. Having talked to consultants and the Royal College of General Practitioners, I know that there is a problem at the moment—at least in perception, if not in reality—of people not wanting to doctor in this country when they would traditionally have wanted to do so. We need to overcome that problem urgently, because we need those people in place, otherwise, there will be an even greater shortfall.

My last point—it is not to do with GPs, but I think it is crucial—is about the pressure on other people within primary practice. I get calls continually from health visitors, practice nurses and physiotherapists saying how difficult things are, and that must have an impact on general practice. If we could ease some of the pressure on those people, we could only help those who want to be in general practice and be at the front end of our NHS.

3.6 pm

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) on making such a powerful opening speech. I want to talk about primary care in Plymouth, because I am worried that the crisis we have is at risk of getting much worse in the coming months, as GPs are considering whether to hand back their contracts in the next couple of days.

A lot has been done in Plymouth to integrate our healthcare system and our social care system. Sometimes our distance from London has meant that we have managed to avoid the headlines, but not the hard work. There has been a huge effort of innovation and integration in the west country, merging social care, mental health provision and our acute hospital trust together. Enormous thanks and credit should go to the hard-working staff who have pioneered that, along with the city council and other providers.

There is, however, a problem with primary care in particular. That is exacerbated by other parts of the system that do not seem to work, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) said, but there does seem to be a real crisis in primary care that needs to be addressed. I welcome the news given by Simon Stevens on his visit to Plymouth last week that we will get an additional 12 GP training places for our university, but there is a real crisis today. I am looking for actions from the Minister to assist us in combating that crisis today.

[Luke Pollard]

Nurse and GP vacancies persist in Plymouth's primary care sector, and waiting lists continue to be high. It is important to say that this is not because the superb staff in our NHS are not working their socks off, because they really are. However, there is persistent underfunding of not only general practice but the wider sector. NHS England estimates that one in seven GP posts in Plymouth have not been filled, which is an alarming statistic. I have heard of one GP surgery in the heart of the city that has been advertising a GP vacancy for a year and has had no applications so far.

**Michelle Donelan:** I have similar issues in Melksham in my constituency. Is the hon. Gentleman aware of the targeted enhanced recruitment scheme, which offers £20,000 to attract trainees in areas that have failed to fill places for a number of years? That is available in Swindon, in Wiltshire, but also in Plymouth.

**Luke Pollard:** The problem is that the schemes that currently exist are not having the effect that we need them to in Plymouth, because we have a crisis today.

I want to talk about the concern that a lot of GPs have expressed to me. My remarks will be about what GPs have told me, rather than my analysis of what I believe GPs are saying, because I think it is important that their voice is heard in this debate. Will the Minister meet those GPs so that they can raise their concerns in person? There are a number of GPs who have solutions or suggestions about what can be done.

At the moment each GP in Plymouth has about 2,364 patients. As we heard earlier, the average is about 1,700, so there is a greater demand on the GPs we have in Plymouth. One GP told me last night:

"I've just walked in the door after a day where I saw my first patient at 0825 and left my last patient's home at 8.15pm. Because the district nursing service is currently unreliable (through no fault of their own), I will go back to the latter at 0800 tomorrow as the patient is housebound and needs blood tests."

He went on to say:

"A large part of the pressures on...GP's is the fact that other community services have had such drastic cutbacks."

He said:

"I feel very...lucky to have a secure well-paid fascinating and rewarding job but it is all a little overwhelming and I constantly worry that just one major problem will mean things become very, very unsafe."

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Luke Pollard:** I will continue, if I may. Apologies.

Another GP, Dr Williams, said that the system is failing and it feels as though it might be intentional. GPs have heard NHS England say that it is watching Plymouth as a place where primary care could fall over, a sentiment that several GPs have expressed to me in private. They believe that Plymouth's city-wide system is facing bigger concerns in primary care than elsewhere. A meeting with the Minister is vital, so that he can reassure those GPs that the Department of Health and NHS England are on top of this.

Another inner-city GP said:

"I became a GP to help people with physical and emotional health difficulties and this is a job I have really enjoyed for a number of years. During this time patient needs and demand on

general practice has increased significantly but unfortunately funding has not kept pace...We only get...£115 per patient per year to provide the totality of patient care so it's no surprise we are struggling when some patients consult us at least once a week."

The general medical services contract includes between £73 and £117 per patient, but as we have seen in Plymouth where GP surgeries have fallen over and emergency providers have been brought in, there can be as much as £347 per patient under emergency access contracts. There seems to be a huge financial gap there that could be moderated by supporting GPs—not by giving them more money themselves, but by providing support and assistance so that they can hire more GPs, and by supporting the other professions that make for a successful GP practice.

Worryingly, the doctor I referred to said:

"I no longer enjoy being an NHS GP because I cannot keep pace with demand and I know our patients are getting frustrated with restricted access to their GP. Patients are complaining, and rightly so, but those complaints just compound my loss of joy from the job because I'm working harder than ever to try and provide the service patients want but the majority of feedback we get is negative."

That has been echoed by a number of GPs in Plymouth, who really want to inject the joy and passion back into their role. They entered the profession not because it was easy—it was hard and difficult—but because their efforts would make a huge difference to their communities.

**Alex Chalk:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Luke Pollard:** I will continue, if I may.

I am genuinely worried that Plymouth's primary care crisis is going to get worse in the coming days. We know that there are GPs who are considering whether to renew or to hand back their GP contract—a decision that will be made in the next couple of days. That is deeply worrying not only for them, but potentially for patients.

My GP surgery in Plymouth closed recently, so I know what it is like to lose my GP. At the moment I am especially concerned about people who do not reregister with a new GP, effectively becoming an unregistered cohort of people in the city who then can rely only on acute A&E services. Our staff at Derriford A&E do an absolutely fantastic job, but they cannot keep going if there is a continuing crisis.

The Plymouth *Herald* reports that a third of GP surgeries are at risk of closure as vacancies in primary care escalate. Will the Minister meet Plymouth GPs so that they can raise concerns directly with him? There is an opportunity to avoid the crisis getting any worse through proactive measures. I do not want to see the crisis getting worse and then more emergency access having to be put in place as GPs who have worked beyond the point of exhaustion hand back their contracts. That decision can be justified because of the pressure on them and their families, but we can avert that situation if we take action today. I hope the Minister will address that in his remarks.

3.13 pm

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I compliment the hon. Member for Houghton

and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) on a real tour de force around the issues before us today. Like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I will dwell on an aspect of the issue that affects a constituency that is part of a devolved Administration. I hope that what I am about to say will be helpful at the UK level and possibly at the Scottish Government level.

I come from the basic premise that no matter where someone lives they have an equality of right to decent health services. I represent the second biggest constituency in the UK, and there is a particular challenge in the north of Scotland in terms of access to GPs and other medical services. In that context, within the past few days a big issue has developed—it has been fairly well reported in one of Scotland's main newspapers. In the Caithness part of my constituency, in the top right-hand corner of Scotland, GP provision and access to other health professionals is not what it should be, notwithstanding the best efforts of the professionals that we do have. In no way do I want anything I say to denigrate their efforts because they work exceedingly hard, but the issue is a big concern for my constituents, and they raise it with me repeatedly.

Out of fairness to the Scottish National party represented here, the matter is devolved, but I hope that what I suggest will be helpful. A group called the Caithness Health Action Team has been formed and it outlines the problem on its Facebook page probably more succinctly and better than I can during the brief time available to me. I give credit to the fact that the group is campaigning in a constructive way to try to help matters.

NHS Highland has recently admitted that the recruitment and retention of GPs and similar professionals in other branches of medicine is proving a real challenge in that remote area. It really prompts the question of whether we say there is nothing we can do about it. Do we have to walk away and accept that some parts of the UK or Scotland will not have equality of provision, or do we say we will roll up our sleeves and tackle it? In my book, the answer is the latter.

Before I return to recruitment specifically, one of the most irritating things, or perhaps encouraging things, is that when we recruit a health professional in somewhere like my part of the world—although I daresay it is also true of Plymouth—after a while they begin to love it. There is every chance they might settle and their children be educated locally, and that is good for the community. That is a prize worth remembering.

I want to mention two specific points. Several Members have already mentioned a kind of bursary, a cash incentive to encourage someone to do GP training. We all know how expensive medicine is, how student debt can be built up and the length of time it takes to qualify. This is just a suggestion and it might not be possible within UK recruitment law—I am prepared to be corrected—but I am keenly aware that the armed forces can offer a bursary to go to college or university to be trained, but part of the deal is that when the person graduates the armed forces can send them to where they are needed most. I have a daughter who is serving in the armed forces and she knew right from the start that that was part of the deal. Whether that can be done within UK law, I do not know, but it might be worth looking at. A given health authority could help someone through their five years of GP training, but then have the right to say that for the next two or three years they will be

placed in Plymouth, Wick or wherever in the UK. I think a cross-border UK-wide solution is best in that respect.

My second point is an old one. I remember that when I was a kid the nurse got a house. There were doctors' houses, and that made a difference in recruiting people. As far as I am aware, the nurses' houses have all gone and no longer exist, but it was part of the local authority's responsibility to allocate such housing.

The answer in the Scottish context is for NHS Highland and probably the Scottish Government to take a co-ordinated and targeted approach to a specific problem in a specific part of the highlands. I think the willingness is probably there, to give credit where it is due. As and when a solution is found as to how we get people into the area, that experience could be useful to UK Government Ministers as well. There is everything to be learnt from each other. Should the Minister or the UK Government find a way to deal with these problems before the Scottish Government do—

**Ross Thomson:** As a constituency MP, the hon. Gentleman has no doubt had the same correspondence that I have had from Scottish students who have been denied access to Scottish medical school. I do not know whether he shares my concern that the current cap by the Scottish Government on Scottish domiciled student places means that only 51% of current medical places at university are filled by Scots.

**Jamie Stone:** That is a relevant point, and I share that experience. I do not want to go into the specifics, but within the past two days I have encountered the case of a sixth-year pupil at a school in my constituency who, because of the curriculum limitations in the sixth year, will be unable to pursue the tertiary education in the medical field that she would like to. It is a worry, but I shall take that up with the director of education.

The matter we are debating is a big issue in my constituency. It is particularly acute because of the distances involved, and it is at the forefront of my constituents' concerns. I accept that it is devolved, but I feel duty-bound to air the matter in this place.

3.20 pm

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mrs Moon.

I declare an interest, in that my other half is a GP. He is German and has been here in our service for 32 years. That highlights a particular problem that we shall face in the next few years because of Brexit. As the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) mentioned, GPs are not just gatekeepers, but are the core and heart of general practice, which is where most interactions occur. They specialise in teamwork and continuity. They may know their patients for years and over generations. All UK health services face three key problems. We all face tight budgets and increasing demand because of an ageing population, and the workforce is bringing those things to a head in relatively short order.

There is a drive in Scotland and England to rebalance the proportion of funding that goes towards primary care, to approximately 11% of the budget. With the

[Dr Philippa Whitford]

climbing complexity of cancer care, emergency care, A&E and targets, more money has been moving into secondary and, indeed, tertiary care. The demand is still there. Having worked as a breast cancer surgeon for more than 30 years I can tell the House that we also face shortage and increased demand, so there is no easy solution—but if primary care fails, the entire system fails.

In Scotland the new GP contract was designed by working with the British Medical Association, and at the moment it is in phase 1, which is trying to stabilise the system. Two thirds of practices will have a significant increase in income, and the others will be protected so that no one experiences a fall. Phase 2, which will start next year, is an attempt to consider something a bit more radical. It touches on issues that have been raised by some Members, to do with changing the shape of primary care, and the system. The income of GPs varies hugely. Some practices are immensely profit-making and have a good income. In other areas the GP, despite perhaps working longer hours, may earn £20,000 or £30,000 a year less. That means that the area in question becomes relentlessly harder to recruit to. Consideration is being given to whether there should be a range of income, perhaps similar to what consultants have—an NHS salary.

That is obviously a huge change from the situation at the moment—the independent contractor status. Older GPs who have lived with independent contractor status certainly do not want it to go. They welcome the independence and the ability to design and run their practice as they see fit. However, it is important to recognise that the younger generation feel utterly differently. As has been mentioned, they are not interested in buying into a practice or even, necessarily, in being partners. They are not attracted to the businessman side of being a GP. Therefore we need contracts that do not destroy independent contractor status for those who already have it, or those who want it, but that enable people to work in practices where perhaps the building is provided by the health board, and where they are salaried and can create a more predictable work-life balance.

One of the small-print issues that is arising in England is the fact that no new general medical services contracts have been awarded since 2013; everything has been done on the basis of alternative provider contracts, which means that they are only for five years. It might be attractive to a big multinational to take on a franchise and hope that it gets the contract again; but there is no possibility that a family doctor would be interested in setting up or taking on a practice for a mere five years.

**Jamie Stone:** I am greatly interested in what the hon. Lady is saying, which is very constructive, good stuff. Would she, at this stage in her planning, factor in the extreme rural issue that I mentioned, in any way?

**Dr Whitford:** If the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, I shall come to that naturally later.

The issue of indemnity has been touched on. I am not sure whether it is realised how extreme the position is. GPs in England are paying three to four times the indemnity that GPs in Scotland are paying. The range

in Scotland would be £1,500 to £2,300 on a range of half a dozen to 14 sessions, but in England that would be £5,500 to £9,500. That is a considerable chunk of money to ask of someone, and it is very significant when it comes to taking on the extra weekend surgeries of seven-day working, or out-of-hours work.

**Alex Chalk:** That is an acute point. Does the hon. Lady share my consternation, particularly with respect to out-of-hours work, that in the past few years the premiums have been rising stratospherically? I think they went up by close to 10% last year.

**Dr Whitford:** I absolutely agree. As I have said, it is not particularly an issue in Scotland, but it is very much one in England. I know that it is being looked at under the new contract. Hon. Members may remember the Prime Minister's challenge fund: extra surgeries at the weekend are better paid and do not involve the same indemnity issues as going to do a stint at the local out-of-hours. Unconsidered consequences of that kind must be looked at.

There is obviously increasing demand. We talk negatively about the ageing population, but living longer is a good thing, and I would like to recommend it. I spent 30 years trying to achieve it. In Scotland the number of GPs increased by 9% between 2005 and 2015, but the number of patients over 65 increased by 18%. Obviously, much innovation across the UK is to do with trying to reduce workload. Scotland was first to get rid of the quality and outcomes framework, which had encouraged significant quality improvements but grew into a huge bureaucratic machine. We are working on developing the multi-disciplinary team, with physios, access to counsellors, and pharmacists. That is happening in England as well. One innovation in England is known as "time for care" and concerns extra training at the frontline—reception—to encourage triage of patients to the right member of the team. However, my attention has been caught by the development of a new app that allows patients to book appointments directly; that would remove the option for triage. It is important for innovations to be joined up.

We need to innovate and to use all community resources. Scotland has for 10 years had community pharmacies providing minor ailment services. Our optometrists are allowed to make direct referrals to hospital for cataracts, and now they treat 90% of all acute eye problems. Those are things that may at the moment be referred to general practice simply to ask for a letter to be passed on. That is a waste.

There has, obviously, been a climb in the number of practice vacancies, including in Scotland. Our whole-time equivalent has fallen, in the past three years, by 1.9%—in England the figure is 2.8%. There has been a 50% increase in the number of GPs taking early retirement, at the age of about 57. Some of that is because of the change in pension tax rules. The problem of having too big a pension is a nice one to have; however, if people who invested 40 years ago in very expensive added years are finding suddenly, as they approach retirement age, that that means they are accruing no further pension, we have a problem.

Brexit is definitely a threat. In Scotland, 3.5% of the health and social care workforce—and 5.8% of doctors—are from the EU. In London the figure is 14%. We know

that 14% of EU doctors in Scotland, and 19% in England, are already in the process of leaving and, as has been said, that is simply because they feel unwelcome. As we have seen with the difficulty of getting tier 2 visas over the past four months, recruiting from outside the EU is a real issue. Businesses in London can increase someone's salary to get past the limitations, but the NHS is not able to be so flexible.

**Michelle Donelan:** Does the hon. Lady agree that we also need to tackle social injustices to ensure that the most disadvantaged in our society have the confidence and know-how to pursue a medical career? Does she welcome Government programmes to tackle that?

**Dr Whitford:** I absolutely welcome them. Similarly, in Scotland the new graduate medical programme will take on people who have done other degrees, and that is particularly aimed at encouraging those people to go into general practice and rural practice.

**Jim Shannon:** May I gently ask the hon. Lady whether Scotland has a bursary scheme? Both I and the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) referred to that, as we feel that such a scheme might help.

**Dr Whitford:** Obviously, in Scotland we do not have tuition fees, so that is a considerable difference in student debt, particularly for a five-year medical course. We do not, as yet, have a system of bonding or tying students down. The worry is that that would create a feeling of being trapped, and that as soon as the bond finishes, the person runs away. I am sure that all Governments in the UK are thinking about such things, but it is about working out whether such a scheme is beneficial or negative in the long term. We do have a GP bursary scheme for those entering a traineeship, so that when someone moves from a hospital where they work on-call, and becomes a GP trainee, the drop in salary is compensated.

As the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) said, in Scotland we have a particular issue with the provision of rural services. We have a much higher ratio of GP per head of population, with 91 GPs per 100,000 people, as opposed to 71 in England, 73 in Wales and 70 in Northern Ireland. What often gets forgotten when people look at the weirdly angled weather map, is that although Scotland is one third of Great Britain's landmass, it has 8.3% of the population. Anything that involves providing services across an enormous area is a challenge. We also have 70 inhabited islands that require services. Our recruitment and retention fund is putting additional money into this issue. The Scottish Rural Medicine Collaborative involves 10 health board areas, and relocation money—the golden hello for trainees or indeed any GP moving into practice—has been increased from £2,000 to £5,000. Any GP moving into rural practice will have a golden hello of £10,000, and trainees will have £20,000. That has been rolled out from the 44 island practices to all 160 rural and remote practices.

One key issue driving this problem, which perhaps is not often recognised, is the change from full-time to part-time working. Headcount for GPs is up by 5% in Scotland, but down by 4% from 2013. The change

seems to have been in the last five years—indeed, there is a real culture change as the next generation comes in. When my husband became a GP, he was the first part-timer in his practice. They interviewed all the women before him, because it seemed so weird to have a man who wanted to work part time—that is because I was always in the hospital. Now, out of eight GPs, only two are full time. The number of patients in the practice has not changed, but instead of six actual GPs, there are eight. Therefore, the average GP is working considerably less. In England, the change in headcount of those looking to work full time meant that numbers went from 39,000 to 27,000. That shows the dramatic difference between the full-time equivalent and headcount, and it means that the average GP is working about 70% of what a full-time GP worked. The problem for any Government is that they then need to train 30% more GPs to cover that.

The key, however, is satisfaction. At the deep end, the 100 most deprived GP practices in Scotland face the inverse care law: people do not demand, and therefore service is not delivered. Govan health centre is running the SHIP project—social care and health integrated partnerships, and that innovation is now being picked up elsewhere. It means that GPs have extra time, and a significant multidisciplinary team, but in those areas, 31% of patients will have four or more conditions.

We have an even deeper problem, however, which is the attitude to general practice. Other specialisms look down their nose at it, and therefore a student may not be encouraged to enter general practice. Students are not getting enough exposure to general practice, either as students or in their foundation years. We also have a particular problem with the two foundation years since “Modernising Medical Careers” came in. We pour all our young doctors into a hopper—a computer—and they get divvied out. They will struggle to be with their family or where they were living before. In 2011, 29% of young doctors left after the two foundation years. Last year it was 50%. They do not feel part of the team or have a sense of continuity—things that are utterly crucial to general practice. Therefore, although we may be putting in more money and coming up with schemes, we must also reform the foundation years so that we do not have an entire lost generation.

3.36 pm

**Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) for securing this important debate and for the strong case she made.

To set the debate in context, the NHS has the equivalent of 28,960 full-time GPs, which is 1,300 fewer than two years ago, despite the fact that the Government promised in the NHS Five Year Forward View to deliver an additional 5,000 GPs by 2020. The situation is getting worse as fewer medical students decide to enter general practice, while at the same time more GPs are opting for early retirement. The average age of retirement among GPs is 59, and given that 20% of all GPs are approaching that age, it is no exaggeration to say that there is a ticking retirement time bomb. The situation is set to get a whole lot worse as the number of GP vacancies continues to rise.

[Julie Cooper]

In 2011, the number of GP vacancies stood at 2.1%, but by the end of 2017 that had risen to a worrying 12.2%. NHS Digital data showed that, between 17 March and September 2017, the number of full-time equivalent GPs decreased by 166. Over the same period, the number of GP partners fell by 638. I spoke to one young GP and former practice partner who gave his reason for leaving. They said

“no one wants to be the last man or woman left standing.”

When GP recruitment was raised during Health questions in December, the Secretary of State said:

“One of the best things about the NHS is that people have a GP who knows them and their family.”—[*Official Report*, 19 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 894.]

I agree, but increasingly that is not the experience for many people. For the elderly, the mentally ill and the chronically ill, that lack of continuity is troublesome. I have elderly constituents with complex needs who rarely see the same GP twice, and because no single GP really knows the whole person, they are constantly bounced back and forth between the surgery and A&E. Too often, that leads to hospital admissions that could have been avoided.

In many areas across the country, patients report that they have experienced difficulty getting to see any GP—that point has been made forcefully by a number of Members today. Indeed, it is not just patients who say that: 71% of doctors surveyed feel that patient access to services has decreased. I have spoken with GPs across the country—including some with 30 years’ experience or more—who declare that there is a crisis in general practice, the like of which they have never seen. The traditional service is struggling to cope with the ever-increasing demand from an ageing population, and GPs face unprecedented workloads. In addition, the harsh economic environment has negatively impacted on the wellbeing of many of the poorest people. Depression and stress-related illnesses have increased, further adding to the demand for GP services. Inadequate mental health resources mean that GPs are often unsupported, with patients in need of specialist support. Cuts in adult social care budgets have meant that many old people are left at home without the support they need and with no one to turn to except their local GP.

In the face of all those pressures, it is no wonder that doctors are choosing early retirement. The more who leave, the greater the pressure on those who have been left behind. The downward spiral of retention is particularly evident in the most deprived parts of the country, where the challenge of recruitment is reaching nightmare proportions. I spoke to one GP in such a community. He said that he had had only one week’s leave in three years because he had been unable to recruit either a partner or a salaried GP to help. Other GPs have told me that they feel like they have their finger in a hole in a dam holding back a tsunami of demand.

It is clear that this situation is unsustainable. The BMA says:

“With an insufficient workforce, a funding plan that is no longer sustainable, a growth in population and a sea-change in the level of complex cases being presented, urgent steps need to be taken to save general practice.”

It tells me that eight out of 10 GPs feel unable to deliver safe care. For the benefit of patients and the long-term future of the general practice that we all know and

love—the service that was the envy of the world—the Government must heed these severe warnings from the professionals.

The Government have taken little action to date. When I raised this with the Secretary of State in December, he said that we must

“encourage more medical school graduates to go into general practice as a specialty”.—[*Official Report*, 19 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 895.]

I agree, but progress is poor. The recently announced new medical schools are welcome, but they will not in themselves make the profession more attractive. If the Government are serious about delivering 5,000 additional GPs, they must demonstrate that they truly value the service. At a time when morale in the profession is low, the Government must stop adding to the pressures by demanding seven-day access, which is not a priority for patients.

The offer of an additional £2.4 billion is welcome but does not go far enough. The Government must increase the proportion of NHS funding that goes into general practice. They must put general practice at the heart of a primary workforce strategy. Instead of having ill-equipped private companies foisted on to surgeries, GPs should be offered comprehensive support with everything from surgery premises to professional indemnity. If the sector is properly resourced and supported, it will be a more attractive proposition for medical graduates. Such measures would not only attract new graduates into the profession, but help to retain existing practitioners. The current GP retention scheme for doctors who are approaching retirement and considering leaving the profession for personal reasons is helping, but reducing the daily workload would do more to stem the tide of retirement.

Finally, the service cannot be viewed in isolation. There is no doubt that properly funded adult social care, and public health and mental health services, would alleviate pressure. I also make the case for greater utilisation of community pharmacies, which are not to be confused with the welcome addition of pharmacies in GP practices. They would help in so many ways. A nationwide roll-out of minor ailment services would be a good first step that would help enormously, leaving GPs time to see patients with more serious medical needs.

GPs across the country, the excellent Royal College of General Practitioners and the BMA will be listening. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to our GPs for their exceptional dedication. I want GPs across the land to know that the Opposition appreciate the work they do, which so often goes above and beyond the call of duty. They want the Minister to go beyond warm words and wish lists and to outline a detailed, properly funded plan to save general practice. I hope the Minister will not let the professionals and our constituents—the patients—down.

3.43 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine):** It is a pleasure to see you on your throne this afternoon, Mrs Moon.

I have a lot of time and respect for my shadow, the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper), but what a counsel of despair that was. As the sun comes out after a day of rain in London, let me see if I can bring some sunshine to our proceedings.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) on securing the debate. She spoke passionately, as always, about her constituents and her area. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said that we are often in here together and share many of the same subjects. That is true but, to be fair, he is in here even more than I am.

I note the Prime Minister's announcement yesterday that she intends to bring forward a long-term plan for the NHS with the Secretary of State, Ministers and our partners. That will build on our record of extra funding for the national health service in England year on year since 2010, to deliver a NHS that is fit for the future. I agree with the shadow Minister that this is about the wider NHS, and that we cannot see primary care in isolation. We are able to do what we have done for the past eight years because of the state of the economy, which we have got into a better place. When the economy fails, the NHS catches a cold or much worse, which is important.

**Jim Shannon** *rose*—

**Steve Brine:** I will not give way at the moment.

As everybody has said, we recognise the importance of general practice as the heart not only of our NHS, but in many ways of the country. It is as much about prevention before people get into the NHS as it is a gateway to it. That point was made well by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who spoke for the SNP. As others have kindly said, I am absolutely committed to ensuring that the NHS has the resources, workforce and Government backing to make it fit for the future.

As the hon. Lady said, it is a great success that we are living longer, but an ageing population and more people living with long-term conditions, or so-called comorbidities, means that general practice will become more important than ever in keeping well and living independently for longer. On Friday, I spent a morning sitting and observing—lucky patients—a general practitioner in Hampshire, not in but near my constituency. I watched him do his morning surgery. It was a brilliant thing to do as the Minister with responsibility for primary care, but I would recommend it to any Member who has that relationship with GPs in their area. By sitting and watching, it is possible to see what comes through the door and the pleasures of general practice, which is not dissimilar to the surgeries we hold as MPs.

The number of people over the ages of 60 and 85 is set to increase by about 25% between 2016 and 2030, and the number of people living with long-term conditions is increasing. In 2017, almost 40% of over-60s had at least one long-term condition. I am sure we can all think of people in our families who are in that position—I certainly can. We recognise that that places general practitioners in England under more pressure than ever before, and are taking comprehensive action to ensure that general practice can meet the demand.

The NHS set out its own plan for general practice in the general practice forward view. We have backed that with additional investment of £2.4 billion a year by 2020-21, from £9.6 billion in 2015-16 to more than £12 billion by 2020-21. That is a 14% increase in real terms. That is not made up—those are genuine figures, on the record. As has been said, we have also announced

our ambition to grow the medical workforce to create an extra 5,000 doctors in general practice by 2020, as part of a wider increase to the total workforce in general practice of 10,000. We recognise that that is an ambitious target—it is double the growth rate of previous years—but it shows our commitment to growing a strong and sustainable general practice for the future.

This debate is about recruitment and retention, so let me break those down. NHS England, which we work with—it is approaching its fifth birthday—and Health Education England are working together with the profession to increase the GP workforce. That includes measures to boost recruitment, address the reasons why GPs are leaving the profession and encourage GPs to return to practice. We recognise that GPs are under more pressure than ever, but we want them to remain within the NHS and are supporting them to do so.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) made the point about recruiting and then following through. As I said at oral questions last week, there are things we can do, but there are things the profession can do too. If doctors in general practice are a counsel of despair, it is little wonder that people do not want to follow them. There are some good, positive voices in general practice, ably led by Helen Stokes-Lampard, who leads the Royal College of General Practitioners. She is a brilliant example of the cup being half full. That kind of positivity is very important—it is a partnership.

**Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

**Steve Brine:** I will, but just once.

**Robert Courts:** I am grateful to the Minister, because I am conscious of the time. He spoke about the support that can be given with regards to recruitment and retention. In my area, the cost of housing is part of the conundrum that we have to solve for everybody, but particularly for key workers. Does he agree that excellent, well-run district councils such as West Oxfordshire—ones that think creatively, outside the box, and help to provide affordable housing in a new way that is targeted at key workers—can be part of the solution to the recruitment and retention challenge?

**Steve Brine:** They can certainly be part of the attractiveness of coming to an area. My council in Winchester is one of the few authorities that is building new council houses—all power to it. My hon. Friend makes his point well, as always.

Increasing training in general practice is important. It is a top Government priority, which is why HEE has made 3,250 places in GP speciality training available every year since 2016. As a result, the number of doctors entering training has increased year on year. In 2017, a record 3,157 new starters were recruited to GP training posts.

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South spoke very well in introducing the debate, but hon. Members may not be aware that she asked me my first question as a Minister at Health questions in July. She said:

“Does the Minister accept that new medical school places should be created in areas such as Sunderland, where there is the greatest need to recruit and retain general practitioners?”—[*Official Report*, 4 July 2017; Vol. 626, c. 1008.]

[*Steve Brine*]

All I can say is that we were listening. I did not say yes at the Dispatch Box, but we looked at the under-doctored areas and at the areas where it is hardest to recruit, which is why Sunderland's bid was successful. I am glad she welcomed that.

The hon. Lady also welcomed the University of Sunderland putting that in place. As she said, the medical school will encourage general practice as a speciality after students have completed the two years of foundation training. It is envisioned that 50 new students will enrol in 2019 and 100 students in 2020. Experience tells us—this will be encouraging to the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper), who is no longer in her place—that GPs tend to stay longer in the area where they train, so it is an exciting development for general practice in Sunderland. Once someone has gone there, why would they leave?

As we have heard, the Government have introduced the targeted enhanced recruitment scheme, which funds a £20,000 salary supplement for GP trainees who commit to work for three years in areas of the country where GP training places have been unfilled for a number of years. The hon. Member for West Lancashire is back in her place now—she missed her mention, but I am sure she will catch up on it. The scheme was launched as a one-year pilot in 2016. It was extended for a further year in 2017 and again in 2018. It is a positive innovation.

I am whipping through my brief because of the time. There are a lot of points to try to respond to, and if I do not respond to them all, I will write to hon. Members. A number of hon. Members asked about international recruitment. In August 2017, NHS England announced plans to accelerate its international recruitment to 2,000 GPs in the next three years.

A small number of pilot areas started recruitment last year. The next stage of the recruitment programme is on track to start at the end of the financial year as planned. The aim is to recruit 600 doctors by the end of March 2019 and the remainder by the end of March 2020. As the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South said, that is part of the north-east and Cumbria submission to the national scheme, which runs from this year to source qualified GPs from abroad to work in England. She welcomed that, as do we.

On retention, in addition to our significant efforts to train and recruit more GPs, we want experienced GPs to stay in the NHS and are supporting them to do so. The GP retention scheme, which the hon. Lady mentioned, is a package of financial and educational support to help doctors who might otherwise leave the profession to remain in clinical general practice. It was launched to support GPs who cannot work more than four sessions per week and who cannot secure a suitable substantive post. In September, 218 GP retainers were working in general practice, which is a 40% increase on two years previously.

The induction and refresher scheme provides a safe, supported and direct route for qualified GPs to join or return to NHS general practice in England. By December, it had received 600 registrations. Of those, 368 GPs have completed or are progressing through the scheme back into general practice.

Several hon. Members rightly mentioned pensions. We need experienced GPs to stay. Pensions are an issue for them, alongside workload and indemnity. They are

ultimately a matter for the Treasury—it would be a foolish junior Health Minister who wrote Budgets in Westminster Hall—but my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) recently made the point in Prime Minister's questions—the Prime Minister assured him that the Chancellor was listening. He will also listen to hon. Members who have raised it today. We certainly need to address it. As the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire said, to have a full pension pot is a nice problem in some ways, but I take her caveat on board.

We recognise that indemnity is one of the challenges to people staying in the profession. It is a great source of concern to GPs and to me. We want to put in place a more stable and affordable system of indemnity for general practice. At the Royal College of General Practitioners conference in Liverpool in October, the Secretary of State announced that we would develop a state-backed indemnity scheme for general practice in England. We are working with GP representatives and those conversations are going very well. We expect to announce further details of the scheme in May, with the scheme going live in April next year.

Several hon. Members rightly mentioned the partnership model. The Secretary of State and I believe in the partnership model and that it has a role to play in the future of general practice, but times have changed, as the hon. Member for Stroud said in his first point. The Secretary of State announced at the RCGP earlier this year that we are setting up a review with the BMA and the RCGP to consider how it can be reinvigorated and sustained for the future. We hope to announce further details soon. I encourage hon. Members to engage with it.

I get excited about multidisciplinary teams and the wider workforce in primary care, because they are so important. They allow experienced GPs to deal with people with long-term conditions and comorbidities. Pharmacists working in general practice through the pharmacy integration fund, who will number 2,000 by 2020, are very important, as is community pharmacy. The hon. Member for Burnley is passionate about that, as am I. They are part of one NHS and are funded through public funds, so they should absolutely be part of sustainability and transformation partnership discussions. I discussed that with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society at the Department yesterday. The wider workforce is critical to us.

General practice is and always has been the heart of the NHS. GPs play a crucial role in our communities in terms of treatment and prevention. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) said that the majority of feedback that we get is negative—he mentioned the feedback from some of his GPs—but that is not what the GP patient survey says. In answer to his question, he should bring those GPs in. I would very much like to see them and I may even make them a cup of tea. He should contact me and I will do that.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions. A tremendous amount is going on, and we face a tremendous challenge, but good things are happening across the country and I am out and about visiting all the time. We have to take that best practice and not just share it, but implement it across the NHS in England to address many of our primary care challenges.

3.58 pm

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am grateful to all hon. Members who contributed to the debate. We have heard that the future of general practice faces a significant challenge the length and breadth of the country.

On the Minister's point about funding, since 2010, the rate of increase in NHS spending has slowed considerably. It is well below the real-terms average increase of the 3.7% that the NHS has received since its inception in 1948.

For all that the Minister referred to the Prime Minister's comments about a long-term and sustainable funding model for the NHS, we are nearly eight years on. We need that model, but we also need something to undo at least some of the damage that has taken place in that time.

On a more positive note, given the success that we achieved in the University of Sunderland bid, I hope the Minister will look carefully at regional variation in the fill rate for training places. We need to take more action to address it.

The scale of the challenge that we face with general practice is clear. It falls to the Minister and to NHS England to take action so that all our constituents, no matter where they live, get the access to world-class healthcare they need.

**Dr Whitford:** On a point of order, Mrs Moon. I have a factual correction to make. The hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) stated that only 51% of students at Scottish universities were from Scotland. In fact, it is 70%.

**Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair):** I am sure that information will have been gratefully received.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered recruitment and retention of GPs.

## Unconditional University Offers

4 pm

**Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered unconditional university offers.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, for what I hope will be a debate that is both pithy and genuinely important.

I remember being at school when I first heard about unconditional offers. I thought that perhaps some Oxbridge college, then the usual issuer of such things, would be so obviously struck by my talents that an unconditional offer would be a possibility. The prospect of an unconditional offer gave me hope of relief from the pressures of the exams that dominated my life then and that sometimes dominate young people's lives now. So I hope that hon. Members will not interpret this speech as an attack on unconditional offers per se.

By the way, I pause briefly to add that in so far as Oxbridge was struck by my obvious talents, it was only to suggest that I attend a different university, but perhaps taking my teenage self down a peg or two was the best thing that Oxbridge could have done.

Back then in 1999, and indeed up until last year, the typical student who was made an unconditional offer was still predicted three As—by the way, I was not predicted three As—although Oxbridge had abolished unconditional offers earlier. UCAS has reported that 3,000 unconditional offers were made in 2013, and that in 2017 the figure was 50,000. The Department for Education and the Select Committee on Education are therefore right to look at the overall picture, which has seen a quintupling of such applications, according to UCAS, from less than 1% of all offers in the past to more than 5% today. In my own constituency nearly 30% of all applicants received at least one unconditional offer, and those applicants were predicted grades ranging from BBC up to ABB.

This growth in unconditional offers comes not from universities that dominate the top of the league tables but from elsewhere; nor does it come in the subjects for which university entrance is the most hotly contested. Less than 0.1% of all medicine and dentistry students received unconditional offers, compared with nearly 10% of all mass communications and documentations degrees. As a former journalist myself, I would not dare to demean a media studies degree, but given that at one time there were more people studying the media at university than there were actually working in all of it, it is right to ask why universities are seeking to fill their courses in this new way, and whether it is for financial reasons.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this matter forward for debate; I spoke to him before the debate, telling him that I would seek to make an intervention. Does he agree that the fact that over 15 times more unconditional offers as in the past have been made to university students in the UK indicates a mindset among universities of focusing on ensuring that they reach their capacity of "bums on seats" rather than on a student's ability to take a course? Does he agree that some children will go with a course that is less suited to them than other

[*Jim Shannon*]

courses as they will know it is in the bag, as it were, and that they will therefore miss out on courses that could have been better for them as an individual?

**Matt Warman:** I agree absolutely with the hon. Gentleman. Indeed, that contrasts sharply with what Universities UK has said in response to the Education Committee:

“Unconditional offers account for a very small proportion of all offers made by universities. It is simply not in the interests of universities to take students without the potential to succeed at university.”

There has clearly been a huge growth in the number of unconditional offers, for some of the reasons that the hon. Gentleman has just mentioned.

Schools have expressed concerns about students across the spectrum of abilities not performing to their full potential in exams, because they are safe in the knowledge that they have already secured a place at university regardless of their grades. Although that can be a welcome safety net for some students, we must balance it with the impacts that it can have on schools and how it affects their exam results overall, for which they are held accountable and against which, of course, they have their own performance measured. This is not a new problem but it has now spread far more widely, as I said earlier.

In my constituency, anecdotal evidence has been cited of students giving up college courses after receiving an unconditional offer, which of course may result in their struggling at university if they have missed fundamental information that they would otherwise have been taught. If we let this development go unchecked, we are letting our young people down at a time when we should be supporting them in preparing for their next step in education. Of course all universities should be able to make unconditional offers, but in doing so they should surely exercise a duty of care to the interests of the prospective student at the same time.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's views in a moment on what is a complex matter. Some universities, for instance, have reportedly been inducing students to come to them by giving unconditional offers, so long as they are ranked as the student's first choice. In the competitive landscape that a large number of universities find themselves in, such a tactic could be seen as potentially damaging to students, when other incentives would more typically involve vouchers or computers.

The risk is that a student might end up with a degree from one university when they might have got into another university that is ranked more highly, and that they might end up with worse results in their school exams because they did not need good grades to get to university. It is a vicious circle if things go wrong, and it applies to all subjects rather than simply being about the promotion of the most academic subjects.

I will give an example from my constituency. Already this year, 23 students at Boston Grammar School have received an unconditional offer from at least one university. That is more than a third of the students from the school who have applied to universities for admission through UCAS. If there is a demotivational effect, there is a risk that it will reflect badly both on the school and on the students themselves in later life.

The headmaster of Boston Grammar School, John McHenry, who has helped me to put together this speech, tells me that the school has even seen comments suggesting that universities would “appreciate” it if students completed their studies. He says:

“In other words, it actually won't make any difference at all if they don't finish their A-level courses. It's very difficult to understand how it is possible for universities to permit students onto degree courses without passing examinations, when schools themselves have strict admission criteria relating to A-level courses. How would a 'free for all' at A level impact on GCSE results nationally?”

If people drop out of school courses prior to university, or prior to doing anything else, it will compromise both their ability to complete a degree and their CV for the rest of their life. This is a serious issue.

The risks of having the wrong unconditional offers system are obvious: universities struggle to attract the best students for a course, which can lead to those with lower exam results being accepted, but those students then end up struggling further, which in turn holds those children back when they become adults. It compromises the long-term quality of that university course, and schools, too, are punished for declining results. The ramifications of getting this matter wrong are extensive.

Universities are rightly independent of Government, but they are also regulated and subsidised by taxpayers. In this area, as in others, a totally free market may not serve the wider interest. As *The Times Educational Supplement* has highlighted, some universities have explored making so-called “contextual offers”, whereby lower grades are required of members of certain demographics. Although that seems like part of the solution, that sort of positive discrimination should very much be handled with care. Likewise, courses such as music and art may rightly rely on a portfolio of work rather than purely relying on A-level grades. However, those two things do not explain the situation that we are in.

This debate is ultimately about pupils; it is not about universities or schools, but about the pupils who are going through the system potentially damaging their CVs and job prospects for the rest of their lives. I end by quoting Malcolm Trobe, deputy general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders:

“Universities need to understand that making unconditional offers to students on the basis of predicted grades is not in the best interests of these young people. It can lead to students being less focused on their A-levels because they feel their university place is in the bag. They then attain a lower grade than they are capable of achieving and this can later become a significant problem for them if a prospective future employer takes A-level grades into account in their selection process. We urge universities not to make unconditional offers on the basis of predicted grades, and advise students against choosing a course on the basis of an unconditional offer and to ensure they find the university and course that best suits them.”

Today I echo that call, and I hope that the Minister will consider reviewing the effect of unconditional offers on the overall education ecosystem.

4.10 pm

**Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on securing the debate. I want to talk briefly about the impact of unconditional offers in restricting opportunities.

The first problem with unconditional offers is that they tend to come with conditions, mainly that students must place that university as their first choice. In 2017, less than one fifth of unconditional offers were down as insurance offers. Students are therefore often encouraged to pick a lower-performing university or a course that is not ideal for them. In other words, they hedge their bets. We are inadvertently encouraging them to underestimate themselves, yet universities are supposed to open doors, not close them. In the past, unconditional offers were often made on the basis that students were perfect matches or star pupils, but that is not the case anymore. UCAS found that predicted grades of BBB were more likely to get unconditional offers than straight As. With an increase in fees, we have seen an increase in unconditional offers. Some 50,000 students last year were made an unconditional offer. That is an increase of 1,629% since 2013.

A second way that unconditional offers can restrict opportunities is through the knock-on effect they can have on A-level results, as we have heard. Unconditional offers encourage students to take their foot off the gas, which can have important long-term ramifications because those A-level results stay on students' CVs for life. When I am seeking to employ someone—I am sure colleagues do this—I look at their A-level results and give them due diligence and consideration. Some colleges have reported that up to 75% of students given unconditional offers have failed to meet the expected grades. Again, that is not opening doors but closing them.

I sit on the Education Committee, and in December the chairman of Ofqual admitted that the situation is very concerning. I agree with the head of UCAS, who said that we need an “open and honest debate” about unconditional offers and their impact. We need to halt the rising tide of unconditional offers, which are closing doors and opportunities for young people in Chippenham and across the country.

4.13 pm

**The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) on securing this important debate and on the balanced and self-deprecating way in which he made his speech. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the issues he raised.

I, too, am deeply concerned by the recent large increases in the number of unconditional offers received by students and the potential impact that those offers can have, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) so clearly outlined. For example, some students may coast in their studies at school or college or perhaps not even complete their course. Another possibility is that students might accept the obvious attractions of an unconditional offer at one institution, rather than a conditional offer at an institution that would better suit their ability level. I want to be clear that higher education providers should not make unconditional offers to students who lack the talent and potential to complete a higher education qualification, especially when those students may benefit from exploring different education options or becoming employed on finishing their A-level qualifications.

It is right that higher education institutions should be able to make unconditional offers when it is appropriate, but I agree with Members that that should be done with extreme care. I therefore welcome this opportunity to highlight the sharp rise in the number of unconditional offers made in recent years and why it is right for the House to be concerned. Data from UCAS for last year shows that the number of unconditional offers to 18-year-olds increased to more than 50,000 from fewer than 3,000 in 2013—a seventeenfold increase. Last year, 17.5% of 18-year-old applicants received at least one unconditional offer. While the overall proportion of such offers remains relatively low, at some providers unconditional offers account for more than 20% of all offers made. The House is right to be concerned.

Universities rightly have autonomy over their admissions. The principle of institutional autonomy has been recognised as central to our higher education system for many years. In fact, the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 goes considerably further than previous legislation in recognising that principle. Institutions select their students, and it is their responsibility to ensure that they only take students who are appropriately qualified and able to succeed on the course they are applying for. I expect institutions to assess carefully the impact of unconditional offers on students, ensuring that they really do get the right students for the right courses. They should not allow students without the potential to succeed to continue into a route that will not benefit them.

There is considerable advice from UCAS for prospective students on how to consider unconditional offers. UCAS advises applicants to wait until they have received initial decisions from all their university and college choices and then to consider them carefully before accepting an unconditional offer as their firm choice. It also emphasises to students who accept unconditional offers the importance of completing their qualifications to the best of their ability, recognising that employers are likely to be interested in their exam results as well as their degree classification.

Our reforms in the 2017 Act will help ensure that institutions are accountable for ensuring that the students they recruit can succeed. We have put in place a new regulatory framework, and the teaching excellence and student outcomes framework will include metrics on non-continuation. The TEF will take into account student feedback, drop-out rates and graduate outcomes to help prospective students make the right choices and ensure that they get the value for money they deserve from higher education. That will act as a strong incentive for institutions to ensure that they recruit sensibly and support all their students to succeed.

In addition, and in response to the concerns that many have expressed about the impact of unconditional offers, the Government have already asked the Office for Students to monitor and review the number of unconditional offers made by registered higher education providers. It is important that the sector and the public have the evidence available to make clear judgements about any impact such offers may have on student access and outcomes in higher education. The Office for Students intends to work with UCAS to analyse the data on unconditional offers made during the last three years. They will look at such factors as provider, location, subject and student characteristics, including the grades with which they ultimately entered higher education

[*Mr Sam Gyimah*]

relative to their predicted grades. That will enable initial conclusions to be drawn on the scale and focus of unconditional offer making and its impact on attainment prior to entry into higher education. The OfS will produce a report on the first aspect of the work this year.

The OfS will also analyse the relationship between unconditional offer making and subsequent outcomes in non-continuation, attainment, progression to postgraduate study and employment. Where the OfS identifies a problem, I expect it to take action in accordance with its powers set out in legislation. The exact course of action will be for the OfS to determine. I am clear that I do not intend to see the life chances of young people adversely affected by a desire to fill places at some institutions.

This is the right debate to have, and we are having it at the right time. The OfS will come into being on 1 April, so it will be well placed to take the necessary action in the interests of students, as my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness said. We want the university system to act in favour of students.

*Question put and agreed to.*

## Cotswold Line Upgrades

4.21 pm

**Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered upgrades to the Cotswold line.

It is a great honour to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mrs Moon. I am pleased to lead this important debate, and thank all colleagues who have come to take part.

The debate is timely because the Department for Transport is consulting on the future of the Great Western Railway franchise along the Cotswold line. I have responded in full to express my priorities for the Cotswold line, for west Oxfordshire, and for the future of rail services along that line. I would like those priorities to be reflected in the re-franchising process as it progresses.

Rail services are crucial to the future of west Oxfordshire. There are eight train stations in that district, seven of which are on the north Cotswold line. The two largest are Hanborough and Charlbury, but a number of smaller rural stations are equally important to the people who use them: Ascott, Shipton, Kingham, Finstock and Combe. Tackley is also in my constituency, but it is on the Cherwell valley line.

The annual passenger entries and exits for 2016-17 give an idea of how popular and well used the services in my constituency are. I will not give all the figures at this stage, but suffice it to say that the total for 2016-17 was 737,552, whereas in 2006-2007, it was 486,771.

[*SIR EDWARD LEIGH in the Chair*]

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, and I thank Mrs Moon.

The use of railway services in my constituency has increased over the past 10 years by 52%—an increase of 250,781 passenger entries and exits. That shows two things: first, that there is a very real appetite for the services that are provided; and secondly that significant improvements to those services will be needed in the years ahead. We can do so much more to make the most of the existing line if we work together and look to the future. That is necessary because, given the expected housing growth over the next 10 years, we will need to make the most of the services along that line. It is important to look at Oxfordshire as a whole economic unit, and for west Oxfordshire not to be forgotten when looking at infrastructure.

I am pleased that there have been improvements, and that there will be further ones in due course, particularly at Hanborough and Charlbury. The installation of shelters, footbridges, coffee shops and additional parking is welcome, and very much improves the overall passenger experience. However, more can be done to improve the infrastructure around those stations. For example, working closely with local councillors and the parish council, I have been pushing for a pedestrian bridge at Hanborough over the railway along the line of the road. Simply put, a pedestrian bridge would reassure passengers making their way to the station that they can do so safely. It would make the station more accessible and encourage more people to use it. As the station grows in size and importance, safe access for pedestrians is essential. It is always important to remember not only what people do when they get to the station, but how they get there in the

first place. I look forward to meeting councillors, representatives from the parish council, GWR and, if necessary, Network Rail in the coming weeks to try to find a way forward.

In the longer term, I would like longer platforms at Hanborough if necessary, a second platform, more parking, further cycle provision both on trains and at the railway station, and the station building that has been procured, which is soon to be installed. We want people to use public transport and rail transport, but the key lesson is that they will do so only if they have a service that is comfortable, affordable and reliable.

I will now lay out some of the things that I think will help in the years ahead. On upgrades to the Cotswold line, the route between London Paddington and Hereford, specifically past Oxford and serving the stations I mentioned—Hanborough, Charlbury and so on—would greatly benefit from increased train frequency. It is a valuable commuter line, with many residents travelling to London for work, as well as to Oxford, Didcot and Reading. The line is currently well served from Oxford onwards, but is not so well served through west Oxfordshire. That is a problem in the evenings, when there is only one train an hour from Paddington to Hanborough and Charlbury. Increased frequency and later return times from London would enable residents to enjoy more flexible and stress-free travel, and would improve the business and economics of our area and the areas along the route.

The current timetable is far from ideal. The last evening train from London departs at 9.50 pm on Saturdays, which is not good for people who have to work late or at weekends, or who have gone into London for events. My constituents need to be able to do those things, but they are restricted by the existing service. With a little work, the infrastructure could provide so much more. Early morning commuters are also affected by the current frequencies. The first train from Hanborough to London every morning is at 6.13 am, and runs only every 30 minutes. That is not regular enough now, let alone when the number of passengers grows, as we can expect in the years ahead, having seen such growth in recent years.

The solution is to redouble the north Cotswold line at least to Hanborough, but ideally all the way to where it is currently redoubled at Charlbury. Ideally, the solution would involve electrification, certainly to Oxford. Only then can we use the line's full capacity, and use the existing track bed to provide the rail services that west Oxfordshire needs. I hope I will be forgiven for stressing that the track bed used to have two tracks. Parts of it now have only one, but a second track could easily be provided. That would have enormous advantages in terms of frequency and reliability. That simply must happen as soon as possible if we are to establish faster, more frequent journeys to and from London.

I commend the work of the north Cotswold line taskforce. I have attended meetings of the taskforce and will work closely with it to realise our shared aims. I also commend the close working of the county council, the district councils and the growth board along the entirety of the line through Oxford and beyond. The single track is a severe hindrance to progress and must be addressed if we are truly to improve services along the Cotswold line.

On public transport, we need to consider the whole journey of passengers, not just the part of the journey that is spent on the train. That is important in west Oxfordshire, where stations are often located in villages some distance from jobs and people's final destinations. No matter how good the rail service—if all my recommendations are followed, we will have an outstanding rail service—people will not use the train if they are stranded when they get off it, miles from their place of work or their home, without a reliable transport link. They will not use those stations and the rail facilities if they cannot get there in the first place.

That is a problem at Hanborough, which is located about six miles outside Witney. There have been improvements in the area, but we need a fully integrated timetable that links rail and buses. People should be able to leave for the train to go to the bus stop, or get off the bus and within a few minutes be on a train heading for their destination, be that London or Oxford. Only through that system can we have a smooth link from Witney to Oxford or beyond. Hanborough could and should function as a Witney and wider west Oxfordshire rail service, without the need for a car. If we work together, that is easily achievable.

We need to think creatively and encourage transport providers to work together. We can co-ordinate timetables, promote integrated ticketing systems for trains and buses and develop smart card schemes, which offer savings to passengers who buy a joint train and bus ticket. That would remove the need for paper tickets—the system could work like the Oyster card, making the most of modern technology. It would give passengers more control over their journeys and enable greater flexibility and choice. Crucially, it would encourage greater use of public transport.

As a keen cyclist, I would like much more space for cyclists to bring their bikes aboard trains and more racks at railway stations if they wish to leave them there for later collection. If we want to take cars off the road—I suggest that we all do in our various areas, as I certainly do in west Oxfordshire—and promote public transport, we need to ensure that public transport is fully integrated, and that different modes of transport are effectively sewn together. All of those things together will increase passenger numbers and at the same time reduce congestion by taking cars off the roads.

One example is the Cowley branch line. I support the reopening of the line to passengers, a shuttle service running from Hanborough through Oxford and on to Cowley, more parking, and the creation of a concentrated public transport hub, including cycle and bus provision, and regular and reliable connections to Witney, Eynsham, Woodstock and beyond, and particularly to the nearby Oxfordshire garden village planned in close proximity to Hanborough railway station. Having a regular shuttle service from Hanborough to Cowley will enable many residents to avoid driving on the A40.

Any hon. Members who have heard me speak about transport in west Oxfordshire will know that I mention the A40 all the time. I make no apology for doing so. A reopened branch line will enable people to avoid driving on the A40 in the first place and would dramatically ease congestion by providing a direct route for commuters from west Oxfordshire to Oxford

[Robert Courts]

and the other side of Oxford and the employment located there. Simply put, the more people we can encourage to use this existing line, the fewer people there will be using the A40.

The full potential of this option will be realised only with an integrated public transport network around Hanborough as a hub. That would enable residents around west Oxfordshire to travel to those large employers in south Oxfordshire or around, without having to drive, which would reduce congestion on the A40 and other roads. The importance of that to west Oxfordshire is simply impossible to overstate. It simply must be addressed, and this is a relatively straightforward way of doing so. It is an affordable, deliverable option that would not alter the essential rural characteristics of our area.

Smaller rural stations are absolutely vital to people, businesses and communities, but some trains from rural stations to Oxford are as infrequent as one a day. Delayed and cancelled trains have a far greater impact in those communities than they do in other places. There is no later train for them to catch, or even a bus. They are stranded and have no way of getting to work or surgery appointments or wherever they may be going. A great many constituents who rely on such services have written to me recently to express their concerns over the number of cancelled trains they have experienced in recent months. I simply say that we must improve services at Hanborough and Charlbury, but we must not forget those who rely on services from the smaller stations in between.

There is a safety concern at the crossing at Tackley—Tackley is not on the north Cotswold line—and this debate comes at a poignant time: 10 years ago this week, 82-year-old Margaret Evans, a Tackley resident, was tragically struck and killed by a train when she was crossing the platform to catch a train to Oxford. A great many pedestrians and cyclists use that crossing every day. A passenger bridge is the solution we must work towards—that is what I am pushing for. We need to resolve this once and for all. I will continue to work with Network Rail, Tackley Parish Council and the local community to see that solution as soon as we can.

I do not wish to bring a cloud of negativity as the sun is finally coming out outside, but I have to mention the poor service in recent months, because it is of enormous significance to my constituents. In the first 34 working days of 2018, there were 16 cancelled trains between Charlbury, Hanborough and London, and a great many more delayed services. That figure will only have grown in recent days and weeks. There are particular problems on the 16.22 service from Paddington, which so many of my constituents rely on to get home in the evenings. I accept that some of these are unavoidable delays—we have all experienced extreme weather in the last weeks and months. The redoubling of the line, which I have spoken about, would go a great way to improving reliability. It is a major issue.

Many of the cancellations and delays are avoidable and are down to a lack of train crew. I know there have been challenges introducing the new intercity express trains, but when people are spending increasing sums of money for tickets, it is not unreasonable for them to

expect a superior service than that which they currently experience. People should not be paying rising fares for a decreasing service.

I hosted my first “Ask the GWR” public meeting earlier this year in Charlbury, with GWR and Network Rail—I am grateful to them for coming along. More than 100 local people came to express their concerns. They are understandably angry at the service they have experienced recently. I have been working with GWR—I am grateful to GWR for that—and putting pressure on it to address the poor service many have experienced in recent months. I look forward to things improving in the weeks and months ahead. People need to feel that they are getting value for money and I will always endeavour to ensure my constituents receive the high standard of performance and service they deserve. Currently, the level of delays and cancellations is unacceptable.

I have four key points in conclusion. First, we urgently need to upgrade the north Cotswold line, including redoubling the line and increasing the frequency of trains to and from London. Secondly, we should look at opening the Cowley branch line for passengers with a shuttle service to Hanborough to significantly reduce congestion on the A40 and other roads. Thirdly, we need to upgrade existing stations and ensure they are safe and accessible. Fourthly, we need to think creatively and encourage greater timetable and ticketing co-ordination between rail and bus services. We need to build a truly integrated public transport system in west Oxfordshire that is fit to meet the demands of the future. We need a dynamic rail service for a dynamic area.

4.30 pm

**Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on securing this debate. I will not try hon. Members' patience by repeating his comments, but my constituency also lies on the north Cotswold route, which is vital to the local economy, and I therefore echo his concerns and comments—in particular, his appeal to the Government for assistance with further upgrades. I want to express my appreciation for the tone he adopted, because it is important that we are partners with GWR. We want to support it and work with it, but by its own admission its recent service has been disappointing. I will talk about that shortly.

I am incredibly fortunate to represent Mid Worcestershire, which covers the main Wychavon areas—one of the most desirable places to live in the country. I am originally a Lincolnshire boy, Sir Edward, and I know you may disagree with me. Of course, Witney is quite a nice place to drive through on the way to Worcestershire.

**Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair):** On the contrary, I am enjoying the slow journey through the Cotswold countryside.

**Nigel Huddleston:** Mid Worcestershire is a fantastic place to live, work and play. Employment is plentiful, we have a thriving creative sector, and tourists from all over the world come to visit us, but we are relatively let down with transport and infrastructure. The M5 runs through the area, but we have a particular problem with trains. That is highlighted by the fact that it is possible to travel from London to Coventry or Leicester in 60 minutes—they are both a similar distance from

London as Evesham, near where I live—and to Warwick Parkway in about 80 minutes, but it takes 2 hours to get to London by train from my constituency. The slow service is a source of frustration, particularly when it comes to encouraging more tourism.

Worcestershire and Oxfordshire are two of the fastest-growing shire counties, and therefore this focus on infrastructure is pivotal to the long-term economic growth of our regions. We are obviously keen to work with the Government to encourage economic vibrancy and activity. I talk about tourism quite a lot. I am pleased to say that in the southern part of my constituency, Broadway is about to have a new train service for the first time in 58 years. I thank the Gloucestershire and Warwickshire Steam Railway line for its efforts. It will open a new service between Broadway and Cheltenham this weekend, which is fantastic.

I join the calls for further upgrades to the Cotswold line and the redoubling of the line, for which my hon. Friend argued eloquently, but I do not wish to minimise the progress that has been made so far. In my constituency, we have seen significant increases in passenger numbers at all the train stations along the line, so there is clearly a desire to travel by train. I would like to express my appreciation for the efforts of various bodies and groups, including the Cotswold Line Promotion Group, the North Cotswold Line Task Force and the Vale Public Transport Group, as well as many Worcestershire MPs and the local council, for continuing to lobby and work with GWR on these improvements in services. We have already seen some significant improvements. There has been some redoubling of the line beyond Oxford, and some expansion of car park capacity.

I am also pleased that, in the not too distant future, the new Worcestershire Parkway station will open in my constituency. Once completed, it will significantly enhance Worcestershire's connectivity to regional and national destinations, including London. As befitting a modern train station, it will be fully accessible, with disabled spaces, secure bicycle parking and charging points for electric vehicles. There will be about 500 parking spaces in total. That alone will do much to set Worcestershire Parkway apart from the other stations serving the region.

The Minister will be familiar with the asks my hon. Friend and I are putting to him today, as unfortunately we are merely reiterating some appeals that have been made many times over the years to the Government. Although I appreciate that redoubling the Cotswold line is a lengthy project that will require a considerable amount of taxpayers' hard-earned money, it is difficult to overstate just how positive the impact could be on the region. Redoubling the line is one of the first issues I raised in this House shortly after being elected in 2015. My hon. Friend's predecessor as MP for Witney, the then Prime Minister David Cameron, told the House, in response to my question at Prime Minister's questions, that he agreed that further investment in the redoubling of the line was necessary to deliver the extra and more reliable services that our constituents deserve right along the line.

One of the most common sources of frustration for rail users along the Cotswold line is the lack of parking. For Honeybourne station in my constituency and Pershore station, just across the border in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriet Baldwin), parking is a particularly acute issue for an ever-growing population. Honeybourne station, which

is in the very south of my constituency, right on the border with Gloucestershire, is just a bit too far away to get the immediate benefit of the expansion at the new Worcestershire Parkway station. Plans for an extra 200 spaces at Pershore station were first unveiled several years ago, but progress is being hindered by ongoing disputes between Network Rail and Great Western Railway about who should provide the funds necessary to construct a bridge that would connect the station to the desired new car park.

My neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire, has been working tirelessly to move the process along and has been trying to facilitate dialogue between Network Rail, GWR, the Department for Transport and Wychavon District Council, which owns the land the new car park will be built on. The responsibility for solving the issue does not fall on any one single organisation. I would welcome any suggestions from the Minister about how we can look to the Government for ideas for funding sources to move the issue along.

I would welcome the Minister's view on what more the Government can do to hold franchisees to account when the services they provide to British taxpayers fall short. As my hon. Friend the Member for Witney said, in the past few months there has been a significant deterioration in the GWR's service along the north Cotswold line. I am sad to say that my mailbag has been full of complaints about GWR's service from constituents including my predecessor, Sir Peter Luff—he does not bother me often, so we know this is a major issue.

GWR's performance report identifies that there has been particularly poor performance on the London to Cotswold line during rail period 12. The 11.22 am and 2.21 pm trains from Paddington to Worcester Foregate Street feature on GWR's list of the top 10 worst-performing trains. On Monday 12 February, which some local groups have dubbed a black day on the Cotswold line, six trains were cancelled completely and six were either terminated or started at Worcester Shrub Hill, instead of operating through Worcester Foregate Street, the Malverns or Hereford. Two days later, another six services between Worcester and London were cancelled, and two commuter services between London and Worcester did not operate for a week due to a lack of available drivers. Although GWR has acknowledged publicly and in communication with me that the service it provides has fallen short, the issue has not been addressed fast enough. The Vale Public Transport Group has claimed that there is growing evidence that businesses and leisure travellers are deserting the Cotswold line to travel on the more reliable and regular routes from Birmingham or Warwick Parkway. A number of constituents have told me that they have had to abandon the train altogether and now drive into work because they cannot risk relying on the Cotswold line to serve their needs.

The current GWR franchise has already been extended by a year and will run until April 2020. I believe that is not the first time that has happened. The Government are currently analysing the feedback to their consultation on the future of the Great Western franchise, and I look forward to reading those findings. The consultation sought views on, among other things, splitting the franchise. I think the Government should seriously consider creating a stand-alone franchise for the north Cotswold line. That is something that my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire has been particularly vocal about.

[Nigel Huddleston]

I am not alone in hoping that any future franchising agreement will include an explicit case for redoubling the whole of the north Cotswold line. I hope we can secure the Minister's support for that goal.

4.48 pm

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, for this excellent debate. I thank the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts), who gave an excellent presentation. I have read his vision for the Cotswold line in his response to the GWR franchise consultation, in which he set out a coherent vision for his constituents. I also thank the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), although I contest his claim that Mid Worcestershire is the best place to live—I would certainly put York on the map. I would welcome him to York, which has really good rail connectivity. The hon. Gentleman highlighted incredibly well the situation for his constituents, and it was good to hear about the reopening of the link between Cheltenham and Broadway, with the opportunities that that will bring.

On the future franchise model for GWR, I must first stress that we cannot afford to see greater fragmentation of the railways. The hon. Member for Witney talked about consistency across the south-west and Oxfordshire area, making a sound case for what Labour believes is the way forward, which is one railway. He has said:

"I would instinctively prefer to keep the franchise as one... Having one, integrated, coherent service in coherent regional groupings is preferable... to have greater vision for the system as a whole, have greater economies of scale and have resilience in challenging circumstances. Secondly, it is preferable for passengers, as they have one coordinated service with one simplified fare structure and the same standard of service."

I could not have said it better myself—the same standards, one ticketing methodology and greater co-ordination. We want to see that in the public sector, which is perhaps where we differ on such matters, but we certainly agree with the sentiment that we want the railway system to come together after fragmentation and the pain that that has brought.

Indeed, the Government recognised some of those strengths on pages 23 and 24 of the consultation document on the future of the Great Western rail franchise. The document calls for the franchise to be extended by a further 12 months and then, following discussions, a further two years—another example of a direct award, an extension of a franchise, again demonstrating that the franchising system is simply not working.

We would also strongly make the case that transport cannot be seen in silos. First, on active travel, as a cyclist I concur with the remarks made by the hon. Member for Witney—it is crucial that we look at how people access our transport system through cycling and walking. Some of the developments in cycling, in particular in the Netherlands, have been inspirational. When the Dutch talk about multi-storey buildings at railway stations, they are talking about bike parks, not car parks. We have much to learn from other European countries about the progress they have made in achieving a modal shift.

We also need to ensure connectivity with the bus network and other forms of transport. For passengers, a journey does not take place in a silo; it starts at their

front door and ends at their destination. We must see seamless transport moving through, ensuring that options are available to the passenger, so that we see the modal shift off the roads and on to more suitable public forms of transport.

Why? We believe that investment in a fully co-ordinated transport infrastructure is, first and foremost, essential for the environment—something that barely got a mention in the franchise document, only two small paragraphs. I want to see the Government put more emphasis on the environmental necessity of having a secure public transport system. Investment can also address issues such as congestion which, whether it is on the A40 or the A64 just outside my constituency, exists on our road network across the country. We need to see modal shift for those reasons, and we know that would be better for business and for the economy, and to enhance quality of life.

In fact, we would say that road building in future should be the last resort, not the first. For example, when looking at parking capacity, we need to look first at the public transport alternatives to bring about the modal shift, so we can ensure that public transport solutions are trialled first and foremost. That means having discussions with current bus franchise holders. We also believe that determining some bus routes to support the rail network is vital.

Talking about connectivity, I remember when I used to travel between Norwich, where I was living, and Cambridge for a while. I had 59 minutes to wait at Ely station, and that kind of connectivity is incredibly frustrating. We need to ensure good connectivity on our rail system. That is essential if we are to motivate people to use that form of transport. We believe that discussions about bringing track and train—wheel and steel—together is vital to ensure good co-ordination throughout the network.

We also need effective bus services, as I said, particularly in rural communities, which are not well served by buses across the board. We need to see a shift there. We also need to ensure that running times for public transport, as the hon. Gentleman said, whether train or bus, match what the commuter and the wider passenger require, as opposed to what is most convenient or profitable. We need to see that as a public service, extending late, weekend and early running to fit in with the patterns of the economy and people's lives.

Connectivity on branch lines should also be at the forefront. With my medical background, I always use the analogy with the blood system—the arteries carry the main flow of blood, but it is through the capillaries we see the gas exchange. That is, passengers coming on to the network and feeding into the main systems. If we are to realise the capacity of the railways, we need to ensure that we release that capacity by enhancing the branch lines and the feeder networks of different modes of transport.

When assessing future demand and opportunity, we believe that that should begin now. I call on the Minister to do just that, to see whether the Cotswold scheme and other schemes provide that compelling case that has been presented to us today. I therefore ask for clearer understanding of the Department for Transport's methodology for making such assessments. Perhaps it would be good if all Members were written to, because I am sure that many across the House have compelling cases for improvements to their public transport networks.

A copy might even be placed in the House of Commons Library so that people can make that assessment of how to improve transport and connectivity in their constituency and through further discussions with, obviously, Network Rail and other railway bodies.

I heard loud and clear the hon. Members for Witney and for Mid Worcestershire make the case for the redoubling of track. It seems to me that there is a real opportunity here—in particular in the light of the opening remarks by the hon. Member for Witney, when he talked about the increased demand on the railways—so we should have a close look at that. We want to see demand go up, but we want to match that with good transportation links to ensure it is possible.

Where possible, Labour also believes that we have a real opportunity to look at issues such as reversing Beeching closures or at new proposals, perhaps even seeing profitability coming out of that. There is a real future for investment in the railways, and we now need to work with Members across the House to ensure that we get the decisions right. We cannot talk only about high-speed rail; we must also talk about the branch lines, which are of equal if not more importance, so we can see a real shift in how we travel.

We need better connectivity, greater frequency, better timetabling and improved accessibility—we believe it is crucial to ensure that all disabled people have access to the network. It is unacceptable that disabled people often have to travel long distances by road in order to access the railway. I believe that more could be done by the Government to improve accessibility for all passengers, upgrading stations accordingly.

We also need to see electrification of the railway network. That is crucial as we move forward. It is greener, cleaner and what is being demanded. There are also new technologies, such as batteries and hydrogen, so we need to see that investment. The Minister has put forward the ambition that by 2040 there will be no further investment in diesel; I would like to see more ambition from the Government in this area, perhaps to drive innovation by scientists, to see what advances they can make, and to put that innovation at the heart of our economy and growth.

We want to ensure that the passenger experience is enhanced. We are talking about modern facilities for passengers—dependable wi-fi and sockets on trains, which are basics that commuters expect today. We also want to ensure that there is good communication with passengers, and to look at how we can use apps more so that passengers can be kept up to date with intermodal transport forms. We need to have two forms of communication because not everybody uses a phone, but there is real opportunity in the power of technology to communicate far better with the great British travelling public.

We have all seen the real power of the Oyster card. From the regions, we look on with envy because we know the real success that has brought across different modes of transport. But that should not be the preserve of just London passengers—it should spread across the country. I call on the Minister to update us on the work that the Government are doing in that area, and to look at smart technology. It is crucial that we take that leap forward as we have those opportunities, not least because passengers demand that from the Government.

We must address the issue that the hon. Member for Witney made very clear from his meeting with his constituents, about passengers' frustration about paying more and seeing a decrease in the levels of service on the railways. We need more transparency in ticketing. It is the No. 1 issue—everyone thinks they are being diddled out of a decent price on the railway. People go on the internet and they do not know if they have the best deal—perhaps if they had logged on half an hour ago or in half an hour's time, they might get a better deal. We need transparency—people want to know where they are. Could the Minister tell us the work that the Government are doing on that? The public demands it.

The hon. Member for Witney rightly reminded us of the importance of safety on the rail network. It must be the No. 1 priority. He talked about his constituent Ms Evans who lost her life at a crossing. It is vital that we look not just at safety on the track but the wider infrastructure. No one should lose their lives on our rail network. At places such as level crossings, there is more access to the line, and that creates a risk. I would be interested in hearing an update from the Minister on exactly what is being done to reduce risk on the rail network.

In reading the hon. Gentleman's submission, I picked up on some of his constituents' frustration at being fined because they cannot get tickets out of the ticket machine. That is an injustice—people who in good faith have tried to travel on the network should not be penalised. It would be helpful if the Minister could explain how he would approach that issue, to ensure that there are not barriers to people having confidence when travelling on the rail network.

I will come on to the issue of stations, if I may. It is good to hear about the developments coming for two stations, but stations should be seen as a community asset. They are somewhere warm and dry, a place to wait where passengers can sit—often, it is difficult to find seating at stations these days—but also to read and work, have access to toilets, get a drink and meet basic needs. We need stations to provide that facility, but also be a community asset in welcoming people to a community. They are the gateway to a local economy. They are there for residents and visitors, as well as businesses. Although we have seen the hard commercial aspect of stations in recent times, we must think about the community value as we move forward, perhaps to marry up both those agendas and to enhance a facility for the local community at stations. A lot more work can be done on stations.

Finally, I congratulate the hon. Member for Witney on bringing forward this debate. It opened up a number of issues. The speeches from him and from the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire have been exemplary. I believe in their quest to move the railways forward in their constituencies. It is important that we look at how we move the rail service across the country. When a Labour Government are elected at the next general election, we will prioritise an integrated transport system that serves the passengers at its heart.

5.5 pm

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on securing the debate and providing us with an opportunity to discuss upgrades to

[Joseph Johnson]

the Cotswold line. As always, he and my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) have demonstrated their hard-won reputations as extremely focused and dedicated constituency MPs.

All rail services in Witney are provided by Great Western Railway under the Great Western franchise. The debate is timely, as the hon. Gentlemen noted, because it is a little more than a month since the conclusion of the Department for Transport consultation on the future of the franchise. I am delighted that we received more than 800 responses, demonstrating the importance that passengers and stakeholders attach to rail services. The Department is analysing the considerable volume of responses and will respond later this year.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire, with the support of our colleague my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), raised the question of splitting the franchise. I should like to emphasise that, at this point, the Department has made no decisions. Any decision in favour of such a split would need to be made on the basis of real benefits, including to passengers.

It has been suggested that Cotswold line services could be split off to the operator as a separate franchise, with comparisons being drawn with the Chiltern Railways franchise. Such a comparison is not straightforward, and certainly not as straightforward as it would seem on paper—the Chiltern franchise operates close to 10 times as many train services as those on the Cotswold line. Having said that, the Department will look at all suggestions made in response to its consultation. I am grateful for the thoughtful way in which my hon. Friends made those suggestions.

Billions of pounds are being spent to upgrade services for passengers on the Great Western franchise. They aim to improve significantly the services experienced by a hundred million passengers a year, serving them all the way from London to Penzance and from Portsmouth to Worcester. The improvements will include brand new electric and bi-mode trains that will provide many more seats and more comfortable journeys, while timetable changes will mean faster and more frequent trips on many routes by 2019. The new intercity express trains have started operating on the Cotswold line, replacing the older high-speed trains and other types of train. The same trains will operate all fast services between Oxford and London Paddington, complementing those operating on the Cotswold line, ensuring through services on 125 mph trains, even though it has been necessary to defer electrification of the line north of Didcot to Oxford.

The Government have decided to extend the franchise, as the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) noted, for the current operator GWR until March 2020, to make sure passengers get the best possible service while these upgrades are carried out. The Department for Transport will seek to agree terms for GWR to continue operating until 2022, which will allow the improved services to bed in fully before running a competition for a new long-term franchise.

On the future of the Cotswold line, in his response to the Department's consultation, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney made many detailed comments about what he considers should be the priorities for the

development of the route. Given how Hanborough has developed as a key access station for fast-growing communities in west Oxfordshire such as Witney, he focused on the developments and the train services he rightly would like at that station. Today, six services from Hanborough arrive at Oxford in the morning peak. He argues for an even more frequent service. He rightly recognises the importance of science to the economic development of the area by asking for some trains to run direct on a reopened route to Cowley, serving the important area around the Oxford science park. Those improvements and others highlighted in his response to the Department's consultation would require substantial further development of the rail infrastructure in the area, as he noted.

I have seen with interest the formation of the north Cotswold line taskforce, which brings together a wide range of interested parties along the whole route. It would have seemed incredible 20 years ago to aim for a half-hourly service with far shorter journey times. That could be made possible only by a combination of the infrastructure upgrades we are putting in place, including further redoubling of the remaining sections of single track, and the division of the train service into a new regular express service supplemented by slower trains that stop at the smaller stations. I am particularly struck by how the taskforce thinks creatively about financing options and does not simply assume that the only feasible option is more Network Rail control period spending.

The taskforce's work and my hon. Friend's response to the Great Western consultation also highlight that rail is seen as a real and valuable alternative to the car. He put centre stage in his concerns the regular serious congestion on the A40 and other roads in his constituency, and rightly addressed modal shift.

Those who have attended recent rail debates will know that the Government are careful to ensure that they do not commit too early to specific projects in Network Rail's control period 6, which starts in April 2019. I cannot commit at this stage to the project that my hon. Friend advocated so powerfully, because the control period 6 process remains under way, as does the rest of our analysis of responses to the Great Western consultation.

Elsewhere in my hon. Friend's reply to that consultation, he raised the prospect of a new station at Yarnton in his constituency. I referred to the Department's new rail strategy, "Connecting people", which was published in November last year, which makes it clear that, as with the reopening of lines, a strong business case needs to be demonstrated where Government funding is sought for new facilities. The Government will consider proposals on a case-by-case basis, based on the economic benefits put forward by local partners.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the Tackley station crossing. The debate has focused mostly on train services, but that crossing is important. It is a passenger level crossing on a busy cross-country route with many passenger and freight trains, and it is used not just by users of the station, but by locals who want to cross the line and walkers who want to access the Oxford canal walk and the Oxfordshire way. As he mentioned, some years ago it was the site of the tragic death of a user. I recognise that it is not the easiest location at which to provide a safer alternative that is as accessible for all users, but we

are encouraging Network Rail and local users to engage in a constructive dialogue so that we can find an acceptable outcome.

Hon. Members raised the issue of operational performance, which is obviously a critical question for passengers. When the Secretary of State announced the control period 6 funding for Network Rail last July, he put particular focus on better performance. The Government are determined that the railway should become more focused on issues that matter most to passengers, including punctuality and reliability. A more reliable railway would play a critical role in underpinning economic growth and bringing the country together, which is why the Government are committed to taking action to achieve those outcomes. My hon. Friend expressed forcefully the rising concern among his constituents about the level of cancellations on some GWR routes. It is critical that GWR does everything it can to minimise disruption to services and to address passenger concerns when services are cancelled.

On my hon. Friend's points about integration and a more holistic approach to public transport, I draw hon. Members' attention to the smart ticketing initiatives that are under way. Those projects have considerable potential to promote cross-modal use and intermodal shift more broadly. A GWR scheme is in place, and we are looking to develop that more broadly across the country.

**Rachael Maskell:** Will the Minister update the House on progress on smart ticketing? I am sure all passengers are interested in that.

**Joseph Johnson:** I am happy to update the hon. Lady. Good progress continues to be made on the smart ticketing initiative, and we continue to hope that the smart ticketing system will be in place in full across the network by the end of the year. That is our objective, and it is crucial to ensuring that we get all the benefits that modern technology offers our rail system.

Overall, rail users in Witney and Mid-Worcestershire have much to be hopeful about. Brand new trains are already being introduced, building on the improvements

to timetables and stations in recent years. The Cotswold line has come a long way in the past 25 years, but there is clearly considerable potential for it to be further upgraded and developed. My hon. Friend the Member for Witney and groups such as the Cotswold Line Promotion Group and the north Cotswold line taskforce are powerful advocates for change and improvement. Between them, they have an exceptional record of achievement on behalf of the travelling public. The Cotswold line deserves the best possible rail service, which is what the Department is determined to provide.

5.17 pm

**Robert Courts:** I am very grateful indeed to the Minister for that considered and detailed response to our points, and to the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for her response. I am also grateful for the mention of the Cotswold Line Promotion Group, which reminds me to state on the record my interest as a member of it.

We have covered a great number of issues, which I will not go through again now, other than to stress that the tone of the debate and the points we have raised illustrate that this issue is of interest not just to the people of west Oxfordshire and Witney. I am grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) and for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) for their presence, which illustrates not only that the line runs through their patch but that it is of equal importance to many others. The strong business case does not just arise from west Oxfordshire; it is much wider than that.

The Minister kindly referred to the taskforce's creative thinking. I agree with him and also praise that thinking. This has been a constructive and creative debate, which is exactly what we need as we look forward to the years ahead so that we can have the services we need along the Cotswold line.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered upgrades to the Cotswold line.

5.18 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statements

Wednesday 28 March 2018

## BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

### General Affairs Council

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Griffiths):** My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lord Henley) has made the following statement:

A meeting of the General Affairs Council (Cohesion) will be held in Brussels on 12 April 2018.

The General Affairs Council will discuss the future direction of cohesion policy in the next multiannual financial framework. Ministers from member states will present their positions on the strategic context and priorities for post-2020, with a view to influencing the Commission's proposals. A follow-on discussion will cover how cohesion policy could be better communicated to the citizens of Europe.

The Bulgarian presidency will provide an update on non-legislative and legislative items.

[HCWS594]

### Industrial Strategy

**The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark):** As part of the industrial strategy, the Government committed to making the most of the UK's strengths so we can be at the forefront of emerging technologies and industries in the years ahead. The creative industries, from film to fashion, and from arts to video games, are an undoubted strength of our economy; indeed, they are at the heart of the nation's competitive advantage. It was to build on this strength that the creative industries were identified as a priority for an early sector deal.

Sector deals, where industries are invited to come forward with plans for their future, embody the ethos of our collaborative approach. They show how industry and the Government, working in partnership, can boost the productivity and earning power of specific sectors. We have already struck ambitious sector deals with the life sciences, and the automotive sectors, and we will be publishing deals with the construction and artificial intelligence sectors shortly.

Last year Sir Peter Bazalgette undertook an independent review of the sector. The Creative Industries Council with critical input from the Creative Industries Federation and other leading voices across the sector have championed their industry through the process. Today's deal represents a key milestone in this journey but it is just the beginning; the first iteration of an agreement that will develop over time.

The deal contains mutual commitments to invest more than £150 million across the lifecycle of creative businesses, including by boosting the places of the future by funding leading creative clusters across the UK to compete globally; enhancing innovation in technologies and content of the future via research into augmented reality and virtual reality; and ensuring that

firms can access the creative skills of the future via a careers programme that will open up creative jobs to people of every background. There are further commitments to establish a new industry-led trade and investment board to ensure the sector can better take advantage of international opportunities; a new commercial investment programme to provide business and investment support to creative businesses; and new measures to strengthen copyright protection for intellectual property generating creative businesses.

The creative industries account for £92 billion of GVA, 2 million jobs and are growing twice as fast as the economy as a whole. This deal will help generate an environment in which the creative industries continue to thrive.

Today I will place a copy of the document in the Library of the House.

[HCWS593]

## CABINET OFFICE

### Government Property Agency

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden):** I wish to update the House on the establishment of the Government Property Agency as an Executive Agency of the Cabinet Office.

Government are delivering a modern, innovative public estate strategy that drives a step-change in our property ambitions—broadening from a primary focus on efficiencies and savings to one that uses assets as an enabler to deliver our priorities for excellent public services; economic growth; and more land for housing across the UK.

The previous Chancellor set out some of that ambition at the March 2015 Budget where he announced that Government would implement a new commercially driven approach to land and property asset management across the central Government estate and that it would create a new central body which would own and manage relevant property assets.

I announce today a significant step forward in creating a modern, effective and efficient civil service fit for the 21st Century, positioning property as a strategic enabler of wider civil service transformation, through the creation of a Government Property Agency.

The agency will be a new executive agency of the Cabinet Office from 1 April 2018 and will provide the centralised ownership, control and delivery infrastructure needed to unlock benefits across organisational boundaries. It further positions Government to deliver workforce change and wider business transformation, delivering efficiencies and releasing land and property for productive use, including building new homes.

The assets in scope to transfer to the agency at this stage are general purpose assets (offices, warehouse and depots), plus non-specialist science assets. Specialist assets such as courts, prisons and specialist science assets will remain on Departments' balance sheets and the model also excludes devolved administrations, local governments, schools, NHS clinical estates, HCA regeneration assets, MOD estate and overseas estate.

The Government Property Agency has been running in shadow form since January 2017, working with a small number of Departments to test structures and

processes before launch in April 2018. The agency will initially deliver the Government Hubs programme with HM Revenue and Customs and manage non-specialist properties for Cabinet Office and Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—before expanding its scope to the non-specialist properties of other Government Departments in subsequent years.

Creating the agency will bring benefits to Departments and their arms' length bodies through more effective management of the assets they occupy and own. It will establish a single agency providing the basis for a joined-up approach to the management of Government property assets. And the taxpayer will also benefit from reduced cost and improved efficiency of the estate.

[HCWS599]

### State of the Estate

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden):** I have today laid before Parliament, pursuant to Section 86 of the Climate Change Act 2008, the "State of the Estate in 2016-17". This annual report describes the efficiency and sustainability of the Government's Civil Estate and records the progress that Government have made during the financial year 2016-17. Since 2010 we have delivered savings of over one billion pounds in annual operating costs and a 25% reduction in the size of the estate (2.8 million square metres). We have also made significant progress on other key areas including achieving a 33% reduction in emissions by the end of 2016-17, which exceeds the 2020 target of 32%.

Looking ahead, our aim is to ensure that our estate not only delivers value for the taxpayer but also acts as an enabler to the delivery of the Government's wider commitments—from releasing surplus Government land to building new homes, to delivering public services that are more accessible and responsive to citizens' needs and to ensure our estate showcases best practice in mobile technology and workplace design.

[HCWS598]

### Cross-Government Funds Review

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington):** I wish to update the House on how the Government have reviewed the cross-Government funds in order to better support poverty reduction, as well as global and UK security and prosperity.

The major cross-Government funds supporting our national security strategy are the conflict, stability and security fund (CSSF) and prosperity fund (PF). They are a flexible instrument of Government policy overseas. The funds use part of the UK's aid budget to support developing economies, fragile states and regions to prevent conflict and to promote the conditions that drive global prosperity.

As part of the national security capability review (NSCR), the national security adviser (NSA) commissioned a review of the cross-Government funds. The review covered the CSSF, the PF and the empowerment fund (EF). The Government are committed to ensuring accountability and transparency in our aid spending and this review forms part of our ongoing work to ensure we are delivering value for taxpayers and results

for the world's poorest. The report on this review provides more detail on the NSCR's specific recommendations and findings for the funds.

The review found that the CSSF and PF were effective mechanisms for making strategic, co-ordinated, prioritised and integrated use of overseas development assistance (ODA) and non-ODA resources. They drive greater flexibility, broader geographic and thematic reach, and greater diversity in programming than could be achieved through departmental allocations alone.

The review noted that the funds gain greater strategic importance as delivery mechanisms for the National Security Council (NSC) as a result of the UK's decision to leave the European Union. Redefining Britain's place in the world will require us to use our diplomatic, development and defence assets to best effect, which the funds can help deliver. The funds are particularly innovative given their secondary benefits: creating opportunities for international business, including UK business, enhancing UK soft power, and reducing domestic threats.

The empowerment fund was set up to improve links with emerging economies, help tackle extremism globally and support good governance. The review found that the EF's proposed geographic focus overlapped with that of the CSSF and PF. Integrating its aims into the other two funds would improve efficiency, simplify governance and strengthen delivery. Soft power objectives in support of NSC priorities will therefore now be delivered through the CSSF and PF as well as through other departmental funding mechanisms.

As a result of the review, we will enhance the cross-Government funds by improving strategic direction through the new national security doctrine, the fusion doctrine, governance through a new ministerial committee, and efficient administration by merging the secretariats into a single funds unit.

Implementation of the recommendations of the review across the areas of strategic direction, governance and delivery and capability is now fully under way. I have agreed to chair the new ministerial committee that will set the funds' strategic direction. A new joint funds unit will be launched in April 2018. All these measures will streamline governance and drive greater coherence. More on the recommendations of the review can be found in the accompanying report.

Further updates on the cross-Government funds will be available on funds' at GOV.UK pages:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/conflict-stability-and-security-fund-cssf>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cross-government-prosperity-fund-programme>.

[HCWS600]

## TREASURY

### Double Taxation Convention: UK and Cyprus

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):** A Double Taxation Convention with Cyprus was signed on 22 March 2018. The text of the Convention is available on HM Revenue and Customs' pages of the gov.uk website and will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. The text will be scheduled to a draft Order in Council and laid before the House of Commons in due course.

[HCWS605]

## DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

### Universal Broadband

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock):** The Government's manifesto said that "our Universal Service Obligation (USO) will ensure that by 2020 every home and every business in Britain has access to high speed broadband".

Last year we took the first step towards delivering that commitment when the Digital Economy Act 2017 introduced powers enabling the introduction—and review—of a broadband USO with a download speed of at least 10Mbps.

Today I am pleased to announce that we have taken another important step. Following consultation on the design of the USO last year, we are laying our universal service order, setting the design for our 10Mbps broadband USO. Ofcom will now implement the USO in line with the parameters set out in the Order.

We have also published today the Government's response to our consultation on the design of the USO, which sets out our plans in detail. It can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/broadband-universal-service-obligation-consultation-on-design>.

[HCWS597]

## FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

### Foreign Affairs Council

**The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan):** My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs attended the Foreign Affairs Council on 19 March. 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*

The Council discussed the Salisbury attack and adopted a statement expressing the European Union's (EU) unqualified solidarity with, and support for, the UK, including for our efforts to bring to justice those responsible for this crime. The EU takes extremely seriously the UK Government's assessment that it is highly likely that the Russian Federation is responsible.

#### *Ukraine*

The Council discussed recent developments, in particular, in Ukraine's reform process. Ahead of the Ukraine Reform conference that will take place in Copenhagen on 27 June, Ministers welcomed the progress on economic reform but underlined the need for increased efforts in other areas, including the judiciary and anti-corruption.

The Council reiterated its commitment to its policy of non-recognition and support for the full implementation of the Minsk agreements. Ministers expressed their concern over humanitarian issues in eastern Ukraine and reiterated their full support for the work of the OSCE in the region.

#### *Syria*

The Council discussed the latest developments in Syria with the Secretary General of the United Nations' Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura. Ministers

commended his tireless efforts to push for a political solution to the conflict and recalled that the EU has clearly stated there can be no military solution to the conflict. Ministers expressed their concern over the continued deterioration in the humanitarian situation, in particular in Afrin and eastern Ghouta. They urged all those involved to fully and immediately implement UN Security Council resolution 2401. They also discussed possible repercussions of the situation in Syria for the wider region.

Finally the Council discussed the forthcoming second Brussels conference on "Supporting the future of Syria and the region" on 24-25 April 2018, which will be co-chaired by the EU and the UN.

#### *Informal lunch on the Korean peninsula*

Ministers and the HRVP discussed the situation on the Korean peninsula over an informal lunch with the South Korean Foreign Minister, Kang Kyung-wha. Ministers looked ahead to the summit between Kim Jong-un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in that is scheduled for April and the meeting announced between Kim Jong-un and US President Donald Trump.

#### *Iran*

The Council discussed Iran. Ministers underlined the importance of the Iran nuclear deal - the JCPOA - for the security of the region and beyond. They highlighted the need to ensure continuous commitment of all parties involved to the Agreement.

Ministers also discussed other issues outside the scope of the JCPOA, in particular Iran's ballistic missiles programme, as well as Iran's role in the increasing tensions in the region, including in Syria and Yemen.

#### *Ministers agreed a number of measures without discussion:*

The Council lifted the restrictive measures against three persons who had perpetrated violent acts during the incidents in Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina) on 10 February 1997.

The Council prolonged, for 12 months, the validity of the Council decision of 21 March 2011 concerning restrictive measures, making it possible to impose an asset freeze and a travel ban on persons whose activities undermine the sovereignty, territorial integrity and constitutional order of Bosnia and Herzegovina or seriously threaten its security situation.

The Council added four persons to the list of those targeted by EU restrictive measures against the Syrian regime.

The Council authorised the Commission to open negotiations, on behalf of the Union, on an international legally-binding instrument under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction.

[HCWS595]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### NHS Winter Performance

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mr Jeremy Hunt):** I would like to update the House on the winter pressures on the NHS following the opposition day debate held in January.

This winter we have seen worse weather than in many recent years, with sustained drops in temperature known to increase heart attacks, stroke and respiratory conditions. This has been coupled with prolonged pressure on hospitals from beds occupied by patients with norovirus and also flu, having experienced the worst flu season since 2010.

However, despite these extra pressures, thanks to the hard work of NHS staff:

over 55,000 people were seen within four hours per day in February. This is 1,000 more people per day than in the same month last year.

NHS 111 offered 150,000 extra calls each month over winter with the amount of callers receiving clinical advice increased to nearly half; and

over one and a half million more people have been vaccinated against flu compared to the same period last year, with the highest ever uptake among healthcare workers at 68.7%.

Last year's spring Budget allocated £100 million of capital to help hospitals set up GP streaming services with 99% of NHS trusts now having this in place. In addition, at the autumn Budget, the Government provided £337 million for NHS winter funding; this funding has helped the NHS to open over 2,600 acute beds over the winter period.

In order to support emergency care across the NHS, national clinical leaders advised that non-urgent operations should be postponed in January. NHS England has published the information showing that this freed up around 1,400 beds across hospitals in England. This represents around 3% fewer planned admissions this January compared to last year.

The Government remain firmly committed to ensuring that patients are seen promptly when they need urgent and emergency care. The NHS will receive an additional £2.8 billion between 2017-18 and 2019-20. The NHS England Mandate for 2018-19 sets out the milestones for improved A&E performance during 2018-19.

[HCWS603]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation: Operation Claspnet

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd):** In accordance with section 36(5) of the Terrorism Act 2006, Max Hill QC, the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, has prepared a report on the use of terrorism legislation in Operation Claspnet, the investigation into the Westminster Bridge attack.

I am today laying this report before the House, and copies will be available in the Vote Office. It will also be published on [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk).

I am grateful to Max Hill QC for his report. I will carefully consider its contents and the recommendations he makes, and will respond formally in due course.

[HCWS602]

## HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### Bellwin Funding

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak):** On 13 January 2017, there was a tidal surge on the east coast of England which caused damage to flood defences and led to affected families having to evacuate their

homes. I am satisfied that financial assistance under the Bellwin scheme is justified to cover eligible costs incurred by three councils in respect of this flooding.

A scheme will therefore be established under section 155 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. Grant will be paid to the authorities to cover 100% of their eligible costs incurred above a threshold.

The local authorities are:

Scarborough Borough Council

North Norfolk District Council

Waveney District Council

[HCWS607]

## Business Rates

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak):** On 30 March 2017 the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Marcus Jones), the then Minister for Local Government in a written ministerial statement set out the Government's policy on the treatment of plant nurseries in England for the purposes of business rates stating that:

"Since at least 1928, plant nursery grounds have been treated by the Valuation Office Agency as exempt from business rates as part of the general exemption for agriculture. However, following a recent Court of Appeal decision, the Valuation Office Agency has started to bring into business rates buildings at nursery grounds including structures such as poly-tunnels. The exemption for agricultural properties is an important part of the rating system. It ensures that large areas of agricultural land and buildings are not liable to a property tax which could have a significant impact on the cost of farming."

I can confirm to the House that the Government's policy remains that land and buildings at plant nursery grounds should benefit from the agricultural exemption for business rates.

The Government will, therefore, amend the Local Government Finance Act 1988 to ensure both agricultural land and buildings at plant nursery grounds are exempt from business rates. We will bring forward legislation at the next suitable opportunity to meet this commitment. In doing so the legislation will be amended retrospectively, with effect from 1 April 2015. This will allow the Valuation Office Agency to remove from the rating list with effect from 1 April 2015 any plant nurseries which then fall to be exempt from that date.

This change will ensure that agricultural land and buildings are not liable for a property tax which could otherwise have an impact on the cost of farming and produce. It supports the Government's commitment to a vision for a productive, competitive, sustainable UK agricultural sector.

The previous WMS, 30 March 2017, can be found at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statements/?page=1&max=20&questiontype=AllQuestions&house=commons&use-dates=True&answered-from=2017-03-30&answered-to=2017-03-30>.

[HCWS606]

## PRIME MINISTER

### National Security Capability and Strategic Defence and Security Reviews

**The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May):** I am pleased to announce the combined publication of the National Security Capability Review (NSCR) and the 2017 annual report of the National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR). I have placed a copy in the House of Commons Library.

The 2015 National Security Strategy and SDSR set out our vision and three overarching National Security objectives: protect our people; project our global influence; and promote our prosperity. The framework of the National Security Strategy and the SDSR remains right and we are focused on implementing it. The National Security Council (NSC) commissioned the NSCR to identify how we could develop, deliver and deploy our considerable national security capabilities to maximum collective effect.

In the SDSR, we committed to giving Parliament an annual update on implementation of the strategy. This combined publication of the NSCR and second annual report on the SDSR sets out the conclusions from the NSCR and our progress in delivering on our SDSR commitments.

The NSCR updates the SDSR's assessment of the challenges likely to drive UK security priorities over the next decade. These challenges have become more complex and intertwined as the world has become more uncertain and volatile. Domestic, overseas and online threats are increasingly integrated as adversaries develop capabilities and exploit vulnerabilities across borders and between the cyber and physical worlds. We should be confident of the United Kingdom's ability to rise to these challenges, drawing on our great strengths as a nation, and the strength of our National Security Strategy.

The NSCR focused on capabilities that are critical to our national security to support implementation of the SDSR. As a result we will deliver better military capability through the modernising defence programme, designed to ensure our defence capabilities meet the changing threats we face. We will publish a new counter-terrorism strategy, which will include measures to improve our ability to disrupt terrorist plots in their early stages and improve frontline integration of our counter-terrorism response. We will expand and deepen our overseas network to deliver our ambitions for a truly global Britain, and ensure our development capability responds to changes in global poverty and national security. We will improve assurance of resilience and readiness of local and national capabilities and continue to develop an holistic approach to supporting victims of emergencies. We will take a whole-of-Government approach to serious and organised crime, including a national economic crime centre in partnership with the private sector. Furthermore, we will produce comprehensive strategic threat assessments for the border, and the National Security Communications Team will be significantly expanded. We will continue to implement the National Cyber Security Strategy and ensure it keeps pace with the threat. The cross-Government funds will be strengthened with a new ministerial committee and more efficient administration. Supporting this will be a new national

security doctrine, the Fusion Doctrine, which will improve our collective approach to national security, building on the creation of the NSC eight years ago.

We have long been at the forefront of shaping international co-operation on security and the UK is a leading contributor to international missions around the world. The NSCR, alongside successful implementation of the SDSR, will ensure we use our world-leading national security capabilities to greatest effect to protect our people at home and abroad.

[HCWS604]

## TRANSPORT

### Lower Emission Lorries

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman):** The Government are today announcing new measures to change the rates paid by hauliers of less polluting lorries, as part of our plans to improve air quality across the UK.

The newest lorries generate 80% less nitrogen oxide (NOx) emissions than older ones. From February next year, lorries that meet the latest Euro VI emissions standards will be eligible for a 10% reduction in the cost of the heavy goods vehicle (HGV) levy. Euro V and older vehicles which do not meet these emissions standards will pay 20% more.

The HGV road user levy, introduced in 2014, was brought in as a first step to ensure lorries pay a charge to cover the greater wear and tear they cause to road surfaces than other vehicles. This change to the levy will incentivise the industry to choose less polluting lorries.

The Government will make the first changes to the levy to implement the reductions for Euro class VI vehicles through a statutory instrument being laid today, with the remaining changes to increase the rates for Euro V and older vehicles expected to be included in the Finance Bill in the autumn.

Levy rates will continue to comply with the relevant maximum levels set under European law, which for Euro 0-V rates will be determined at the time of the Finance Bill.

Note that the following shows the maximum levy rate. Levy rates depend on vehicle weight and number of axles.

	Changes to the Levy		
	Current rate	Euro VI rate from February 2019	Euro 0-V rate from February 2019
Annual Rate (Band G vehicles)	£1,000	£900	£1,200

[HCWS601]

## WORK AND PENSIONS

### Workless Households and Educational Attainment

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse):** Later today I will publish "Workless households and educational attainment statutory indicators", an annual report pursuant to Section A1A of the Life Chances Act 2010 as amended. "Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families", published

on 4 April 2017, set out this Government's vision to improve outcomes for children who grow up in workless families and face multiple, associated disadvantages. To track our collective progress in improving outcomes for disadvantaged families, my Department made a commitment to publishing the latest data on seven additional non-statutory national indicators each year.

The annual report 'Workless households and educational attainment statutory indicators' will be available here later today:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/workless-households-and-educational-attainment-statutory-indicators-2018>.

The "Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families" indicators will be available here later today:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-lives-helping-workless-families-evidence-base>.

[HCWS596]

# Petitions

Wednesday 28 March 2018

## OBSERVATIONS

### WORK AND PENSIONS

#### Universal Credit programme

*The petition of residents of Bishop Auckland, Shildon, Spennymoor and Teesdale,*

Declares that the Universal Credit programme is pushing people into poverty, debt and homelessness.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department for Work and Pensions to pause and fix Universal Credit before its rollout in Bishop Auckland, Shildon, Spennymoor and Teesdale.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Helen Goodman, *Official Report*, 30 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 793.]

[P002096]

*Observations from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey):*

Universal Credit was introduced with cross-party support to replace the old system, which is complicated, inflexible and involves different agencies and Government Departments. The cliff edges and complicated hours rules would often mean that people were put off from taking up work or trapped into being unable to take on more hours, due to the prohibitive tax rates they would face on earnings. We believe we should have a welfare system that supports people when they need help, assists people into work, and is fair to those who pay for it.

Universal Credit is revolutionising the welfare system by making work pay. It simplifies the system and provides a single payment for people in or out of work, which ensures that people are always better off working and better off working more. The single, simple, taper means that payments reduce in a transparent and predictable way as earnings increase.

Universal Credit provides support for those who cannot work and those who need help, including an unprecedented level of personalised support. People required to look and prepare for work receive tailored support managed through personal work coaches, who know each person's case and have more tools and flexibility than ever before to help people prepare for work and get a job.

Of course, there will always be people who are unable to work and it is right that we support them. This Government continue to spend to more than £95 billion a year on benefits for people of working age. This shows the Government's commitment to a robust welfare safety net.

Last year DWP launched the new Personal Support Package for people with health conditions on Employment and Support Allowance and Universal Credit. This includes 300 new Disability Employment Advisers in jobcentres across the country, the recruitment of new community partners in jobcentres across the country, and more personalised support, including one-to-one health and work conversations.

We know Universal Credit is having a positive impact on employment outcomes, and has been proven by three separate research studies.<sup>1</sup> Qualitative research

also shows a positive impact on employment behaviours. Compared to the old system, people on Universal Credit are 4 percentage points more likely to be in work after 6 months<sup>2</sup>, spend more time looking for a job, more time looking to increase their earnings and will actually consider work they would not have considered doing before.<sup>3</sup> In our research, 86% of UC claimants working less than 30 hours were trying to work more hours, compared to 38% under Jobseeker's Allowance.<sup>4</sup>

Universal Credit has been rolled out in a way that allows us to continue to make improvements. The system is updated on a fortnightly basis and Work Coaches are able to feed into this process, ensuring we respond to issues identified on the front line. Such improvements have included the introduction of measures to make it easier for claimants who need them to have access to advance payments, and making our telephone lines free-phone numbers.

Furthermore, in November 2017 the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a set of Universal Credit Budget measures worth £1.5 billion in order to address concerns raised around the first assessment period, and helping support the vast majority of claimants transitioning onto Universal Credit.

Advances are available for claimants who need them at the start of the claim and, from January 2018, claimants who require support can repay their advance over 12 months interest-free, instead of the previous 6 month period, making it easier for claimants to manage their finances. They can also get an advance of up to 100% of their estimated monthly entitlement while they wait for their first payment rather than 50%, effectively removing the wait until the first payment altogether.

We have already put in place measures to raise awareness of advances, including guidance for staff and a communications campaign in Jobcentres. And we will soon be introducing functionality to allow claimants to apply for advances online, further supporting claimants in accessing this important support.

Since February 2018, the 7-day waiting period has been removed for all new Universal Credit claimants, reducing the first assessment and payment period to 5 weeks and increasing their entitlement by 7 days. Around 750,000 new UC claimants will benefit each year, and the average household will benefit by around £160.

Furthermore, all claimants already receiving support towards their housing costs (Housing Benefit, HB), will, from April 2018, be paid an additional two weeks housing benefit at the beginning of their claim to support them as they transition onto Universal Credit. The HB transition payment measure benefits claimants by an average of £233. This will help reduce the issue of managing their rent payments whilst claimants transition to monthly payments of Universal Credit.

All these measures amount to a comprehensive and wide-ranging package designed so that claimants either receive more, or earlier, access to their benefits than previously.

Evidence<sup>5</sup> shows that work is the best route out of poverty, and Universal Credit helps people into work and progress in work. The smooth taper under Universal Credit gives people a clear incentive to increase their hours, as unlike the old system, taking on extra work will always pay. The childcare offer under Universal

Credit is also more generous than the legacy system, covering up to 85% of eligible childcare costs, rather than 70% underworking Tax Credit. This is designed to help support more parents into work. In addition, when Universal Credit is rolled out an estimated 50,000 more children will benefit from a free school meal compared to the previous benefits system.

The Government have taken a number of steps to reduce the risk of problem debt, including capping payday lending costs and promoting savings. Within Universal Credit, we also have interest-free advances and a system of priority deductions to help claimants who have got into arrears.

We have also made funding available to Local Authorities to deliver Universal Support in conjunction with Jobcentre plus and local partners. This includes personal budgeting support to help claimants manage their finances through the transition to Universal Credit. Work Coaches will maintain an ongoing conversation with claimants about the financial capability and there are a range of tools available to help claimants including a Personal Planner, Budgeting Support guidance and a Money Manager tool provided by the Money Advice Service. If debt problems are identified the claimant will be referred or signposted to external specialised debt support services.

Many of our reforms are directly aimed at providing further support to claimants with their housing costs and helping to prevent any risk of homelessness.

Along with the improvements to advances and the Housing Benefit transitional payment, we have announced changes to ensure that vulnerable claimants in the private sector get support putting alternative payment arrangements in place for managed payments of rent direct to their landlord. Other alternative payment arrangements include more frequent payments and splitting payments between members of a household.

We know that there has been concern that rent arrears increase for people when they claim Universal Credit. However, research by the National Federation of Arm's Length Management Organisations shows that over three-quarters of their tenants were already in arrears before their Universal Credit claim started. Some arrears amount to a pure accounting phenomenon—so called “book arrears”—are caused when a claimant moves from paying their rent two weeks in advance to paying it a month in arrears on Universal Credit, and these clear over time when payment cycles settle down. As set out above, claimants will also receive two weeks additional housing benefit when they transition onto Universal Credit from April 2018.

Whilst we have introduced improvements in the first assessment period to support claimants struggling with the move onto Universal Credit and prevent arrears, we also know that the majority of claimants do succeed in paying their rent, managing their monthly payments and clearing their arrears over time. And our research shows that after four months, the proportion of Universal Credit claimants who were in arrears at the start of their claim, fell by a third.<sup>6</sup>

DWP's priority is to ensure homeless people get the appropriate support they need to move into work so they can succeed and rebuild their lives, and we have outlined how Universal Credit is helping to do just that. But the issue of homelessness is much broader than that, and the solution requires a cross-government approach.

That is why, in October 2018 as part of the Homelessness Reduction Act, Jobcentres in England will be duty bound to refer someone they consider to be homeless or threatened with becoming homeless to a local authority housing team within 56 days.

The Government have allocated over £1 billion through to 2020 to reduce homelessness and rough sleeping. We have established a Rough Sleeping and Homelessness Taskforce to implement a cross-government strategy to achieve our objectives of halving rough sleeping by 2022, and eradicating it altogether by 2027. The Taskforce will bring together Ministers from key Departments to develop a cross-government strategy to tackle rough sleeping and address the wider issues of homelessness prevention and affordable housing.

We understand, that the scale and nature of the change represented by Universal Credit may cause some anxiety. However, unsubstantiated claims about poverty, debt and homelessness being caused by Universal Credit are unhelpful and deter some of those who would benefit from Universal Credit from transitioning onto it. As we have seen the UK Statistics Authority has even stated that some comments of Universal Credit causing poverty and debt have not been supported by the evidence on which they rely.<sup>7</sup>

We have re-profiled our rollout plans to enable us to deliver significant improvements benefiting claimants, whilst continuing to manage roll-out, safely and securely. Stopping or pausing roll-out would mean confusion for claimants already receiving Universal Credit. We will continue to roll out Universal Credit at a measured pace to ensure the real improvements it is delivering are extended to more people. We will continue to listen to our claimants and stakeholders and improve the system as we proceed to ensure we get this right.

Countless studies show that meaningful work increases people's happiness, fosters social inclusion, improves mental health, life chances and life expectancy. Work is a positive health outcome and Universal Credit promotes this. A society where the maximum number of people work is a happier, richer, stronger society.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/644541/universal-credit-employment-impact-analysis-update.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/644541/universal-credit-employment-impact-analysis-update.pdf).

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/403546/Universal\\_Credit\\_estimating\\_the\\_early\\_labour\\_market\\_impacts\\_-\\_ad\\_hoc\\_19.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/403546/Universal_Credit_estimating_the_early_labour_market_impacts_-_ad_hoc_19.pdf)

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/481827/universal-credit-estimating-early-labour-market-impacts-dec-2015.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/481827/universal-credit-estimating-early-labour-market-impacts-dec-2015.pdf),

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/644541/universal-credit-employment-impact-analysis-update.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/644541/universal-credit-employment-impact-analysis-update.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/643952/understanding-how-universal-credit-influences-employment-behaviour.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/643952/understanding-how-universal-credit-influences-employment-behaviour.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/481865/universal-credit-extended-gateway-evaluation.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/481865/universal-credit-extended-gateway-evaluation.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/436482/rr900-child-poverty-transitions.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/436482/rr900-child-poverty-transitions.pdf)  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/households-below-average-income-hbai--2>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/481865/universal-credit-extended-gateway-evaluation.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/481865/universal-credit-extended-gateway-evaluation.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/2018-02-02-Letter-from-Sir-David-Norgrove-to-Ms-Abrahams-MP.pdf>

# Ministerial Corrections

Wednesday 28 March 2018

## FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

### Burma

*The following is an extract from an answer given by the Minister for Asia and the Pacific to the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) following the statement on Burma on 15 March 2018:*

**The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field):** On returns, let me first confirm that at a meeting in China in February the Prime Minister made it very clear in private session with her counterparts the concerns we feel about this issue and have tried to get through the UN process. [*Official Report, 15 March 2018, Vol. 637, c. 1036.*]

*Letter of correction from Mr Field:*

An error has been identified in the answer given to the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman).

The correct response should have been:

**Mark Field:** On returns, let me first confirm that at a meeting in China in February the Prime Minister made it very clear in private session with her counterparts the concerns we feel about **human rights issues**.

## DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

### Draft Data Protection (Charges and Information) Regulations 2018

*The following is an extract from the Second Delegated Legislation Committee on the draft Data Protection (Charges and Information) Regulations 2018 on 26 March 2018.*

**Mr Jones:** I have no doubt that the Minister's Department keeps the budget under review to see whether the Information Commissioner has enough resources, but

what about how the money is spent in practice? As with many such quangos, the question is who is ensuring that the money is spent properly.

**Margot James:** The Information Commissioner's Office has a financial controller, a board, and a chief executive. It is held to account not just by my officials, but by the Secretary of State and me.

[*Official Report, Second Delegated Legislation Committee, 26 March 2018, c. 8.*]

*Letter of correction from Margot James:*

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones).

The correct response should have been:

**Margot James: The Information Commissioner is a Corporation Sole, and is accountable to Parliament. The ICO is held to account not just by my officials, but by the Secretary of State and me.**

## WORK AND PENSIONS

### Welfare Reform and Work Act

*The following is an extract from a Westminster Hall debate on the Welfare Reform and Work Act on 21 March 2018.*

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Kit Malthouse):** The employment rate for women stands at 70.9%, which is also a record high. Unemployment is down to the joint lowest level since 1975, and **876,000** vacancies are open to people in search of employment, which is also close to a record high. [*Official Report, 21 March 2018, Vol. 638, c. 151WH.*]

*Letter of correction from Kit Malthouse:*

An error has been identified in my speech.

The correct response should have been:

**Kit Malthouse:** The employment rate for women stands at 70.9%, which is also a record high. Unemployment is down to the joint lowest level since 1975, and **816,000** vacancies are open to people in search of employment, which is also close to a record high.



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**not later than  
Wednesday 4 April 2018**

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