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10 May 2018**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 10 May 2018

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine 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 Borough constituency of Lewisham East in the room of Heidi Alexander, who since her election for the said Borough constituency has been appointed to the Office of Steward and Bailiff of Her Majesty's Manor of Northstead in the County of York.—(*Mr Nicholas Brown.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport was asked—

Sport Funding: Special Needs Schools

1. **Sir Nicholas Soames** (Mid Sussex) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on funding for sport in special needs schools. [905192]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): The Government's sport strategy sets the ambition that all children, including those in special needs schools, should have the opportunity to take part in meaningful physical education and to lead healthy lives. The Department for Education leads on that, with support from me and the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work.

Sir Nicholas Soames: Knowing my hon. Friend's outstanding commitment to inclusivity in sport, is she aware of the work being done by the excellent Woodlands Meed School in Burgess Hill in my constituency? In a major reordering of its facilities, the school is seeking to build a gym specially equipped to enable children who have serious disabilities to take part in extensive physical training. Does she agree that the gym could be a county-wide facility? Will she see what she can do to investigate and help me raise the funds to enable Woodlands Meed and West Sussex County Council to go ahead with producing this excellent facility?

Tracey Crouch: I commend the work of my right hon. Friend, who has been a passionate supporter of Woodlands Meed. I am happy to meet him to discuss facilities funding for that school, which has an excellent reputation for the work it does to support children with special educational needs in his constituency.

Mr Speaker: I rather imagine the Minister will be visiting the school very soon—just a hunch. We will see.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): We need to try to reach disabled people in rural communities, too. What does the Minister hope to do to reach out to people in special needs schools, people with disabilities and veterans?

Tracey Crouch: Along with the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work and the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), I am passionate about ensuring that all children have access to meaningful physical activity at school. We provide funding—through the school games programme, for example—to ensure that we provide opportunities for disabled pupils and those with SEN to participate. There is also additional funding through the primary PE and sport premium. Through the DFE, we have funded the Project Ability programme since 2011 to increase competitive sport opportunities for young disabled people.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): The Minister will be aware that there are many talented athletes with learning disabilities who have ambitions to represent their country in international competitions, but there are still many barriers stopping them from doing so. Will she agree to meet me, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on learning disability, to see what more the Government can do to remove some of those barriers and allow those athletes to fulfil their aspirations?

Tracey Crouch: My right hon. Friend has done a lot of work on setting up the new all-party parliamentary group on learning disability, and I am happy to meet him to discuss this.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Some special schools clearly have better sports provision than others. What is being done to roll out best practice across the sector?

Tracey Crouch: My hon. Friend is right, and I see the differences in my constituency—some schools really do ensure that pupils with disabilities participate in meaningful PE. The Under-Secretary of State for Education, the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work and I sit on the school sport board, and we discuss these matters regularly.

Football: Safe Standing Areas

2. **Dr Paul Williams** (Stockton South) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the potential merits of introducing safe standing areas at football grounds in the English Premier League and Championship. [905193]

11. **Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment his Department has made of the potential merits of introducing safe standing areas at football grounds in the English Premier League and Championship. [905204]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): The Government believe that all-seater stadiums are currently the best

means of ensuring the safety and security of fans at designated football matches in England and Wales, but we continue to work with the Sports Grounds Safety Authority to consider advances in technology and data that may enhance the existing policy.

Dr Williams: It is a buoyant time for football in Teesside, with Stockton Town in the final of the FA vase and Middlesbrough in the Championship playoffs. Some 94% of Teesside football fans would like the choice of whether to sit or stand when they watch a match, so what advice has the Minister taken from the SGSA about the safety of standing in seated areas?

Tracey Crouch: I regularly meet the SGSA to discuss all matters of safety and I continue to listen to its advice. We are looking at ways in which we can consider advances in technology that do not require legislative change to see how we can deliver that. Having worked for one of the hon. Gentleman's predecessors, albeit a long time ago, I know that many of his constituents are Boro fans and of course Stockton Town fans. Not only do I wish Boro well in the playoffs this weekend, but I wish to thank the Middlesbrough Supporters Forum for its positive engagement in this debate.

Mr Sweeney: Celtic Park is one of the largest football stadiums in the UK and lies a mere stone's throw from my constituency. It is the only stadium in the UK currently to be piloting a safe rail seating area, with 3,000 places available for safe standing for the past two years. Will the Minister therefore consider visiting Celtic Park to assess the merits of that scheme, which has been a great success for the past two years, and look at how it could benefit other stadiums in the UK?

Tracey Crouch: I had the good fortune of bumping into a senior member of Celtic in Parliament earlier this week and we had a brief discussion on Celtic. Both my officials and those from the SGSA have already visited the rail seating area at Celtic to see it in operation. It has not been without its problems and has been closed twice already during the last season because of fan behaviour, but we continue to look at the development of rail seating at Celtic.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): As the Minister knows, a growing number of clubs are calling for safe standing to be reviewed and reintroduced. Does she think this should now be not the matter of a blanket ban, but a matter for safety authorities, the fans and local authorities, and decided on a case-by-case basis?

Tracey Crouch: The Government are committed to the current policy on all-seater stadiums. For this to be different, legislative change would be required. We will have a longer debate on this matter on 25 June, when I am sure we will be able to have a much more engaged discussion on it.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I am a Bournemouth supporter. Would the provision of safe standing not discourage those people who insist on standing throughout the match in the seating areas, which is much more dangerous?

Tracey Crouch: Enforcement powers are in place for the SGSA, to ensure that we deal with persistent standing. Addressing the safe standing issue would not necessarily mean that persistent standing did not happen elsewhere in the stadium, but we are looking at these issues. Clubs should remember that safe standing does not come without cost; as we have seen from Celtic Park, it can be rather costly to clubs.

Mr Speaker: On the subject of persistent standers, I call Mr Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The House will not be surprised that I stand today after the magnificent result of Huddersfield's draw with Chelsea, meaning that we will not be relegated. Is the Minister aware that many of us have fought for years for family-friendly football and some of us have deep reservations about standing areas, where there might be a lot of young men, who like to shout, and sometimes shout racist abuse—I am not saying all of them do. Dean Hoyle, the wonderful owner of Huddersfield Town, has his reservations and so do I.

Tracey Crouch: As a Tottenham fan, may I also congratulate Huddersfield Town on holding Chelsea to a draw last night and helping us secure a Champions League spot? The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there has been a significant change since the all-seater stadium policy came in and that spectators have evolved, and we now have a much more family-friendly place for people to go to watch football. That is not to say that we are not looking at ways in which we can accommodate those who do wish to stand, but we do not have any plans at this moment to change the legislation.

Channel 4 Relocation

3. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Channel 4 on its potential relocation outside London. [905194]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): We warmly welcome Channel 4's agreement to establish a new national headquarters outside London. I am sure that a number of cities throughout the country will be well placed to host Channel 4. The final decision on the location is one for Channel 4 and will be made later this year.

Deidre Brock: Does the Secretary of State agree that the strength of Glasgow's creative and independent television production sector and its rich cultural diversity make it the ideal place for Channel 4 to land? How will he ensure that the devolved nations get a fair share of the spoils of relocation? There should be no more lift and shift, but some real spending on Scottish production companies.

Matt Hancock: Of course, as well as moving its national headquarters outside London, Channel 4 has committed to increase its production spend outside London to 50%, much of which will end up in the devolved nations. I am delighted to say that Channel 4 currently seems to be very popular right across the

country. Once it has made its decision to go to one particular place, I hope it remains popular everywhere else.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): But would not Birmingham be a better choice?

Matt Hancock: I like to make decisions, but I am delighted that this is one I do not have to make.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I should declare an interest as the newly elected Sheffield city region Mayor. If Channel 4 were a city, it would be Sheffield, which is creative, dynamic, authentic and welcoming. It is a city rich in culture. Does the Secretary of State agree that Sheffield would be more than deserving of a place on the shortlist of those cities bidding to attract Channel 4's national headquarters when it relocates?

Matt Hancock: I admire the hon. Gentleman's modesty, because he merely asked for a place on the shortlist, as opposed to winning the decision. Of course, there will also be creative hubs for those cities to which Channel 4 does not move. I am sure that this afternoon's Westminster Hall debate on this topic will be well subscribed, so that this debate can continue further.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Glasgow's bid to be Channel 4's HQ has gathered cross-party and, indeed, cross-city support, with Edinburgh prepared to set aside ancient rivalries. Does the Secretary of State agree that with that level of support, coupled with its ability to draw on production infrastructure and creative and cultural talent, Glasgow ticks all the boxes?

Matt Hancock: I love Glasgow. It is an amazing city that is really going places. I am delighted that there is so much enthusiasm from every corner of the House for the fulfilment of a Conservative party manifesto commitment.

Mr Speaker: I suppose we had better hear about the Northern Ireland situation. I call Mr Gregory Campbell.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I do not wish to add to the bidding war, but when the Secretary of State has discussions with Channel 4 about where it might relocate, perhaps it might also reconsider some of its options in terms of its broadcasting output throughout the United Kingdom.

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It is almost impossible to overplay the amazing advances in broadcasting production in Northern Ireland over the past few years. It has been an absolute triumph and a great addition not only to the economy but to society and culture in Northern Ireland. I am sure that Channel 4 will consider that, too.

Broadband and Mobile Coverage: Rural Areas

4. **Peter Heaton-Jones** (North Devon) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve broadband and mobile phone coverage in rural areas. [905195]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): As well as moving Channel 4 outside London, we are clear that we need to continue to improve broadband and mobile connectivity in rural areas. We hit the target of achieving 95% coverage by

the end of last year, and our broadband universal service obligation will be implemented by 2020, to make sure that nobody is left behind.

Peter Heaton-Jones: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer and welcome the progress that is being made. Does he agree that, in a rural area such as North Devon where small businesses, often based in people's homes, form the backbone of the economy, it is vital that we deliver a good 4G and broadband service for entrepreneurs?

Matt Hancock: I agree incredibly strongly with my hon. Friend, who is a great champion for North Devon. Coverage there is only 85%, so there is much further to go, but I was delighted that Ofcom said yesterday that the average download speed had risen by 28% over the past year. That shows that, although there is further to go, we are making progress.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The single economic area that covers north Wales and extends into west Cheshire is one of the most successful in the UK, but the final link that it lacks is a digital infrastructure hub. We must consider carefully the bid for such a hub that the economic region has put forward. Will the Secretary of State look at that closely?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I have looked at the bid closely; I think it is a good one. I agree with the hon. Gentleman very strongly. I grew up in Cheshire, but I had to drive through north Wales to get to school every day, so I know the area and the links incredibly well. That border is not an economic border at all. Wrexham and Chester, north Wales and Cheshire are all one area when it comes to the economy, and I look forward to working with him on the bid.

15. [905208] **Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): We do have a couple of farms in Bromley and Chislehurst and it is green-belt land. Will the Minister look to see what can be done to rectify the discrepancy between availability of fast and ultra-fast broadband schemes and actual delivery on the ground? In some cases in my constituency, availability might be 93% and 94%, but actual delivery is about 27% or 30%.

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This issue of take-up—how many people take up the broadband that is available—is very important. As availability gets to more than 95%, we are increasingly looking at the levels of take-up that we need to get up to.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that Network Rail is piloting the use of its network of global systems for mobile communications-railway masts for public mobile and internet access in rural areas. What discussions has his Department had with the Department for Transport and Network Rail about rolling out more pilot areas, and does he agree that Devon and Cornwall would make an excellent second pilot area?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I do. I have had a whole load of conversations with the Transport Secretary, Transport Ministers and Network Rail to make sure that we drive

out connectivity where people live, work and travel, and the rail network is critical for a third of those. This morning, I was delighted to see the plans from Network Rail of a digital railway, and we need to get on with that as quickly as possible.

Historic Landmarks

5. **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): What steps he taking to protect historic landmarks. [905197]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): With the benefit of advice from Historic England, the Government protect nationally important heritage assets in several ways, including by conferring statutory protection through the designation system and regulating change through planning policy. In addition, more than 400 buildings and sites in the National Heritage collection are managed on behalf of the nation by the English Heritage Trust, including iconic landmarks such as Stonehenge and Hadrian's Wall.

Maggie Throup: With only two remaining wrought iron viaducts in England, Bennerley viaduct is a grade 2 listed structure, which spans the Erewash valley, linking my constituency with that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry). The community group, the Friends of Bennerley Viaduct, wants to see it restored and linked to the National Cycle Network, but as its most recent heritage lottery bid failed, it fears that the revised plans from Sustrans and Railway Paths Limited appear to lack ambition. Will the Minister look at what more his Department can do to support this community group and help save Bennerley viaduct for the nation?

Michael Ellis: I am aware of the project to which my hon. Friend refers. It was previously funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, and a bid for further funding was made last year. Our arm's length bodies, including Historic England and the Heritage Lottery Fund, provide tremendous support to those looking after local heritage. In this particular case, I know that both organisations are keen to work with the owners and the friends groups to develop a successful scheme.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I declare an interest as chair of the all-party group on industrial heritage. That group has recently published a report on how best to utilise our industrial heritage for the economy of the future. Will the Minister meet me to discuss its many recommendations?

Michael Ellis: I thank the hon. Gentleman and his group for the work that they have done on that report, and I am very happy to meet him at our earliest convenience.

Music Industry

6. **Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): What assessment he has made of the contribution of the music industry to the UK. [905198]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): We are the champions of British music. Music contributes a price tag of £4 billion to the

economy, but it is not about the money. Britain's music is our global calling card, so we will keep on supporting it, so that it is rocking all over the world.

Sir David Amess: UK music is the best in the world, except, seemingly, when it comes to the Eurovision song contest. I celebrate the fact that Southend-on-Sea has a wealth of musical talent. Will my right hon. Friend tell me what further assistance can be given to aspiring performers?

Matt Hancock: We have put a huge amount of effort, policy and enthusiasm behind Britain's music industry, which is gangbuster at the moment. Protecting intellectual property and supporting music and education is a critical part of this. We obviously take inspiration from Southend's famous sons, including Busted, but, unlike Busted, we are determined that it will not take until the year 3000 for us to get there.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), I recently held a roundtable for Bristol's fantastic music venues, which, despite very great hard work, face many struggles. Given that every big star, including all the ones that the Secretary of State just named, has to start somewhere, what is he doing to help our fantastic music venues?

Matt Hancock: Supporting music venues is a key part of it. That includes making sure that if somebody moves in next door, the agent of change principle applies in the planning process, meaning that they cannot complain about a pre-existing music venue. This is a really important change, and one of many that we are making to support music venues.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my dismay that Brexit does not mean that we are leaving the Eurovision song contest?

Matt Hancock: We should apply to the Eurovision song contest a principle that I try to apply to my life: whenever something goes wrong, we should try, try and try again, and maybe we will eventually get there.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): May I thank the Secretary of State for his positive contribution, along with that of the previous Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, in introducing the agent of change principle that he just mentioned into the planning consultation process? I urge him to approach the new Secretary of State urgently to impress on him the importance of this change, as he just described it, for musicians and the music industry, and to get this into parliamentary regulations before the summer?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I should have paid tribute to the right hon. Gentleman's campaign for the agent of change principle. It now exists as a draft measure, and I am absolutely determined to make it a reality.

Ticket Prices: National Sporting Events

7. **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help ensure the affordability of ticket prices for national sporting events. [905199]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): I support a fair deal for fans who want to attend national sporting events in person, but respect that ticket pricing policies should remain a matter for event hosts. However, I personally keep under constant review the cost for all ages of attending live sports.

Mike Amesbury: I am sure that the Minister will want to join me and my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) in congratulating Runcorn Linnets on winning the Hallmark Security League Premier Division title this week. Although my constituents can watch the Linnets for a relatively reasonable price—a very low cost—people attending major events cannot, as prices have rocketed in recent years. Will the Minister outline what steps the Government are taking to ensure that major sporting events are accessible and affordable to all?

Tracey Crouch: I of course join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating the Linnets on their success. I know that he is personally a passionate Man United fan; it is through gritted teeth that I wish his team well a week on Saturday. I appreciate fans' concerns about costs. I always keep these under review. We have worked hard with the likes of the Football Association and the Premier League to ensure that costs are kept down as much as possible. As he will know, the Premier League has done a deal to ensure that tickets for away fans are capped at £30. We do keep these things under control.

14. [905207] **Gareth Johnson** (Dartford) (Con): The Minister will be aware that netball was developed in my Dartford constituency. The sport is growing in popularity and, of course, the England netball team recently won gold at the Commonwealth games. Will she join me in welcoming the fact that the next netball world cup is to be hosted by England, where we hope not only that ticket prices will be reasonable, but that England will prevail once again?

Tracey Crouch: I am aware of the fact that netball was formed in my hon. Friend's constituency, which I am due to visit shortly. I congratulate the England team on their success at the Commonwealth games. We look forward to seeing Tracey Neville's team participate in the world cup, and we hope that the ticket prices will be affordable because netball is growing in popularity.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Any deal to sell Wembley stadium needs to benefit fans and grassroots football. We must ensure that fans are not priced out, which is why Labour has called for ticket prices to be frozen for at least 10 years and for the current list of cup and play-off matches to be guaranteed. We want these clauses to be written into any deal to sell Wembley stadium. Will the Minister back our recommendations?

Tracey Crouch: May I start by wishing the hon. Lady a happy birthday? I also congratulate her on her important contribution to the discussion about Leeds United's post-season tour to Myanmar. I agreed wholeheartedly with her, although I know that the team has begun that tour. I have discussed Wembley with the FA and have secured a commitment that it will not increase costs above inflation for another five years. We are looking at

issues around the sale of Wembley in close detail, and I am sure that the matters raised by the hon. Lady will be discussed.

UK Tourism

8. **Glyn Davies** (Montgomeryshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support tourism throughout the UK. [905201]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): The Government's tourism action plan outlines the way in which we support tourism throughout the UK, namely by investing in product and transport, improving skills, introducing common-sense regulation, and providing the great welcome that we do in this country. We also provide £19.6 million to VisitBritain and nearly £7 million to VisitEngland each year to promote the UK as a tourist destination. They also receive £22.8 million of GREAT funding to support promotion.

Glyn Davies: The first stop for overseas visitors is so often London, but it is important that the economic benefits flowing from overseas visits are spread throughout Britain, and particularly to Wales. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that visitors are encouraged to visit what Wales has to offer, including Powis castle in my constituency?

Michael Ellis: I recognise that tourism in Wales is important to my hon. Friend, who previously had a tenure on the Welsh tourism board. I am very keen to see visitors to the UK explore as much of the UK as possible. In fact, I recently held a roundtable with the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), and a selection of Welsh tourism businesses to discuss how tourism in Wales is performing and what more we can do to support it.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment has the Minister made of the effect of leaving the EU on the skills base particularly of EU citizens in the hospitality and hotel sector?

Michael Ellis: Fortunately, we have a very robust hospitality sector in terms of skills. Indeed, we have confidence in our sector to support the huge demands that there are for tourism and people coming to this country.

Youth Services

9. **Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): What recent assessment his Department has made of the potential merits of introducing a statutory duty on local authorities to provide youth services. [905202]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): The Government already place a statutory duty on local authorities to secure sufficient positive activities for young people so far as is practicable.

Lilian Greenwood: I am proud that Nottingham's play and youth service still delivers in every ward of our city. Its early intervention work with young people who are troubled or at risk can reduce the need for more costly interventions later. However, since the Government's

cuts forced the play and youth services to merge, they have lost more than half their staff since 2010. When are the Government going to stop this short-sighted thinking and start tackling the crisis in local authority youth services by giving them the funding they need?

Tracey Crouch: I am sorry to hear that the hon. Lady's council has made those changes to youth services. I am aware of some other projects in her area that are funded by the Government, including the myplace centre, and #iwill has funded other projects in Nottingham. We are providing £80 million in partnership with the Big Lottery Fund through youth investment and #iwill funds, and we also have £90 million of dormant accounts funding that will help young people facing barriers to work.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): In 2011, the Government produced a policy document, "Positive for Youth", which proposed new partnership models of working between businesses, local authorities, charities and not-for-profit organisations to counter the diminishing provision of youth services. What is the status of that policy?

Tracey Crouch: To be honest, I am unsure, but we are looking at youth policy as part of the civil society strategy, and I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this further.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The Minister refers to the £90 million that is going to be made available to youth programmes via dormant accounts, but will she acknowledge that this makes up just 17% of the shortfall of £765 million that has been cut from our youth services since 2011? When are the Government going to get serious and give local authority youth services the funding they so desperately need?

Tracey Crouch: First, I wish the hon. Lady well in her next venture, which I understand is due shortly. I hope that she will take a decent amount of maternity leave, as I did; it is well worth it.

Funding for youth services is a matter for local authorities. I work very closely with colleagues across Departments to make sure that the funds that I have available are going to the right areas of youth provision, and I will continue to do so.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: We are out of time, but I am going to take a couple more questions if people respect the fact that we are running late. Graham P. Jones—a very short question.

Charity Regulation

10. **Graham P. Jones** (Hyndburn) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase public trust in charity regulation. [905203]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (**Tracey Crouch**): I continue to work closely with the Charity Commission to ensure that we maintain an enhanced public trust in charity

regulation, and in recognition of the increased demand for its services, I have provided additional funding of £5 million.

Graham P. Jones: There have been several scandals with charities in Haslingden and Hyndburn, and I think the public are deeply concerned that the charities legislation and the Charity Commission are failing in their duties. I personally do not think they are fit for purpose. Will the Minister meet me to discuss those matters and how we can make charities more trustworthy?

Tracey Crouch: I am aware of the two cases that the hon. Gentleman refers to, and I will be happy, as always, to meet him.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): May I start by wishing good luck to SuRie, who I am sure Members are aware is the UK's entry in the Eurovision song contest on Saturday night?

The National Fund is a charitable trust with almost half a billion pounds of assets. It has been seeking Government permission to close and release its funds for charitable purposes since 2011. That money would be a lifeline to cash-starved charities up and down the country. Why have the Government dithered for seven years, rather than making that money available to charities?

Tracey Crouch: We work very closely with the Charity Commission and look at these issues on a daily basis. I will happily meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss that issue further. I am sure there are good reasons behind the delay in the process, but my door is always open, as he knows.

Museum Sector

12. **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the museum sector. [905205]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (**Michael Ellis**): The Government are deeply committed to supporting our world-leading museum sector. The recent Mendoza review of museums in England found a thriving sector, supported by more than £800 million of public funding.

Mr Speaker: A sentence will suffice—Luke Hall.

Luke Hall: Thornbury and District Museum is a fantastic local resource serving the interests of the community around South Gloucestershire. Will my hon. Friend update the House on what he is doing to ensure we give local museums the support they need to thrive?

Michael Ellis: Local museums have an essential part to play. Central Government work with a range of bodies to support local museums, including Arts Council England. This year, Arts Council England will spend more than £35 million on museums, including the Museum Development Network.

Mr Speaker: Finally—we do not want him to be left out—Julian Knight.

Public Broadcasting

13. **Julian Knight** (Solihull) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that public broadcasters reflect and provide for the whole of the UK. [905206]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): It is very important that our broadcasting sector reflects and provides for the whole country. Moving Channel 4's national HQ outside of London is part of that, but there is much more besides.

Julian Knight: Although I thank the Secretary of State for his leadership on Channel 4, does he agree that chronic under-investment in the west midlands by the likes of the BBC is a grave injustice and that the 5.5 million people in the west midlands deserve a better deal?

Matt Hancock: The west midlands has an awful lot to say for itself, in terms of more broadcasting. The move of BBC 3 to Birmingham soon is a step in the right direction, but I am sure there is much more to do.

Topical Questions

T1. [905210] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Hancock): It has been another busy month for the Department. We have announced the artificial intelligence sector deal and the creative industries sector deal, agreed an ambitious new tech partnership in India and piloted the Data Protection Bill through the House, while protecting press freedoms.

I will, if I may, take a moment to congratulate my colleague and very honourable Friend, the Minister for Sport and Civil Society. She reaches a milestone of three very successful years in post on Saturday, and here's to many more to come.

Mr Carmichael: I will never forget the day that David Cameron set up the Leveson inquiry, because on that day I met the family of the late Milly Dowler, and you just had to spend a few minutes in their company to understand how radically their lives had been affected by press intrusion. That is why we set up the Leveson inquiry in 2011. That is why David Cameron stood at the Dispatch Box in 2012 and promised the victims of press intrusion that there would be a second part to that inquiry. Can the Secretary of State tell the House what has changed?

Matt Hancock: As the right hon. Gentleman says, there has been bad behaviour by the press, but what has changed is that we have to look forward to how we address things now. Strengthening the Independent Press Standards Organisation and the improvements that we made to the Data Protection Bill yesterday are all about ensuring that we have a system for the future which ensures that the press is reasonable and fair but can also thrive in the difficulties of a digital age.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): In my constituency, the Bristol Robotics Laboratory, based in the University of the West of England, is recognised as the UK's leading academic centre for robotics. Can my right hon. Friend tell me what steps his Department is taking to support emerging technologies, and AI in particular?

Matt Hancock: We are enormously enthusiastic about the advances in robotics, including in my hon. Friend's constituency, and I would love to hear more about that laboratory. We put £1 billion of public and private funds into AI just two weeks ago, and there is a lot more to do to ensure that we remain world leaders in this amazing technology.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I am sure the whole House will want to congratulate Cardiff City on their rightful return to the premier league.

When the Secretary of State was scouring the newspapers this morning searching for favourable headlines about himself, did he see the story in *The Times* relating to the fixed odds betting terminals decision and the need to reduce the maximum stake to £2? The intervention by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Ms McVey), has apparently blocked the Secretary of State from being able to make that announcement. Who is in charge of gambling policy in this country—him or the right hon. Member for Tatton?

Matt Hancock: Me.

T5. [905215] **Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): The recently announced CityFibre-Vodafone partnership will make ultrafast, gigabit-capable, full-fibre broadband a reality for Stirling's residents and businesses. What steps will my right hon. Friend be taking to further encourage private sector involvement in the construction of digital infrastructure?

Matt Hancock: I thoroughly enjoyed my visit to Stirling, where I saw on the ground the leadership my hon. Friend has shown in making sure that Stirling is a fully connected, future-facing city. He has lobbied me endlessly to make sure that we can get the strongest possible connectivity, including full-fibre connectivity, in Stirling. He is doing a sterling job.

T2. [905211] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware of the recent in-depth report by the highly regarded Lords Committee on Artificial Intelligence. Among its recommendations, it calls on the Government, with the Competition and Markets Authority, to proactively review the use and potential monopolisation of data by big tech companies in the UK. What is the Secretary of State doing about its recommendation?

Matt Hancock: We are studying those recommendations closely. That report by the Lords Select Committee was one of the best reports by a Lords Select Committee I have ever read, so we are taking it extremely seriously.

T6. [905216] **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): I never thought I would say it, but HS2 will mean shorter journey times between the west midlands and London,

so does that not make the region an obvious choice for Channel 4? When will it make the decision to change its headquarters?

Matt Hancock: It has made the decision to move its national headquarters, and it will make the decision about where to move them before the end of this year, with the move taking place next year. The case that my hon. Friend makes for Birmingham is a very strong one.

T7. [905217] **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What steps is the Secretary of State taking, and what resources does he intend to provide, to facilitate the UK's commitments under the European charter for regional and minority languages?

Matt Hancock: I am a great fan of minority languages. I grew up just on the Welsh border; I love the Welsh language, and I have strengthened the support for S4C through the S4C review. I am in discussions with the hon. Lady's colleagues about BBC Alba as well.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Fixed wireless could provide an immediate solution to superfast broadband in rural areas. Openreach knows this, but constantly refuses to deploy it. Will my right hon. Friend do all he can to persuade it to change its mind?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I will. In terms of using technologies to get broadband rolled out, we should use whatever technologies are best in the location and the geography that there is. Of course, North Yorkshire has very big spaces, and fixed wireless is often the best approach.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): I declare an interest as a season ticket holder at Liverpool. Does the Minister agree that it is appalling that Liverpool football club has been allocated only 16,626 tickets for the Champions League final, some of them costing up to £400? Liverpool is one of the best-supported clubs in the world. This is not really paying due respect to the fans who support the game.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): That is a matter for UEFA, but I share the view that we want to make sure that Liverpool fans get the opportunity to go along and celebrate being in the Champions League final.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Recently in my constituency, I delivered surveys in rural areas to see how my constituents felt about the mobile coverage that was being delivered. I have had over 200 responses in the last week, and many people are not particularly happy with what is being delivered in their areas. What is my right hon. Friend doing to ensure that these notspots are eliminated?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that, while we have improved mobile coverage, and 90% of the country is now covered, 10% still is not. We are therefore going to put requirements on the mobile phone companies, so if they get licences in future spectrum auctions, they are going to have to do more in rural areas.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What are Ministers doing to tackle the issue of scam adverts online, as highlighted by Martin Lewis recently?

Matt Hancock: I have seen with interest Martin Lewis's legal action against Facebook. We are following that with great interest. The internet safety strategy will be coming out in the coming weeks, and that will address these issues.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Yesterday's Ofcom report stated that Scotland had the lowest average rural download speeds anywhere in the UK. That has a huge impact on my constituency, so what are both of Scotland's Governments doing to address that?

Matt Hancock: Overall in the UK, we have seen improvements of over 28% in download speeds over the past year, but it is frustrating that we have not been able to get as much broadband coverage in Scotland as we could have done, because the SNP Government in Holyrood have been sitting on millions of pounds of UK cash for over four years now.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): In March, a Populus poll of premier league fans showed that 72% supported the introduction of standing areas at football grounds. Why does the Minister believe that only a "vocal minority" want this to happen, and where did she get the figures for such an assertion?

Tracey Crouch: I speak regularly with the Premier League, which has done many surveys on this issue. While I regret using the phrase "vocal minority", it is true that only 5% of fans would themselves like to stand, but I appreciate that there is a wider group of very passionate fans who think that standing should be reintroduced.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): What assessment has the Secretary of State made of yesterday's article in *The Daily Telegraph* by Adrian Parkinson, who led the campaign against FOBTs for the Campaign for Fairer Gambling? In it, he said that the campaign was

"greased in hyperbole, spin, misconstrued evidence and, worst of all, commercial jealousy",

that there is no justification at all for a £2 maximum stake, and that

"the Government has fallen for the spin and hyperbole—hook, line and sinker."

Matt Hancock: I did see the article, not least because my hon. Friend sent it to me via WhatsApp, and it is safe to say that I did not agree with all of it.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Scottish Government are having to invest £25 million to cover some of the mobile notspots, so rather than talking about future licensing requirements, when are the UK Government going to come up with cash to help with Scotland's geography?

Matt Hancock: A very significant proportion of the mobile masts that went up thanks to our UK taxpayer-funded emergency services network were in Scotland, and the drive for greater geographical mobile coverage will benefit Scotland disproportionately.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What is being done to help with mobile phone signals, particularly in rural areas such as west Oxfordshire where a signal is vital for businesses?

Matt Hancock: We are doing everything we can to speed up the roll-out in rural areas.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Since the Government launched their review of gambling, more than £2.8 billion—£57 a second—has been lost on fixed-odds betting terminals. I urge the Secretary of State to put an end to this misery.

Matt Hancock: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her work on this subject and the cross-party effort she has led. We have looked at all the evidence, and we will be coming out with our response shortly.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Ministers will know that Cleethorpes is the premier resort of the east coast, and we much appreciate the support that has come through the coastal communities fund, but what policies do Ministers have further to enhance the support for seaside resorts?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): We are supporting seaside resorts—in fact, we are supporting locations all around the country—because tourism is a vital asset for Cleethorpes and many other areas.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab) *rose—*

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: As I am in a very generous mood, each of the two remaining Members may have a sentence, but no more—[*Interruption.*] Order. We are running late; you are a lucky man, and I have been kind to you. Mr Morgan, get in there.

Stephen Morgan: Will the Secretary of State join me in visiting the D-Day Story, a fantastic new museum that is opening in Southsea tomorrow?

Michael Ellis: I very much support the opening of new museums everywhere.

Michelle Donelan: Will the Minister join me in congratulating AFC Corsham, which battled the heat on Saturday to play a 12-hour football match in aid of the wonderful charity Scotty's Little Soldiers?

Matt Hancock: Of course I will.

Mr Speaker: Marvellous.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Knife Crime

1. **Damian Collins** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to improve the rate of prosecution for knife crime. [905218]

4. **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to improve the rate of prosecution for knife crime. [905222]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The serious violence strategy, published on 9 April, sets out our response to serious violence, which includes knife crime. We will legislate to tighten the law in this area, and the Crown Prosecution Service continues to work with law enforcement agencies to tackle knife crime and other forms of serious violence.

Damian Collins: Following Donald Trump's speech to the National Rifle Association, does the Solicitor General agree that the streets of London would be far more dangerous for communities if criminals and gang members were armed with automatic weapons rather than knives? Does he agree that while longer sentences for knife offenders are important, we also need to do more to understand the underlying causes of knife crime and gang violence?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right about the need to tackle the underlying reasons for knife crime, whether that is carried out by gangs or young people in isolation. That sort of work is far more valuable than attempts by the President of the United States to channel Sean Connery in "The Untouchables".

Damien Moore: How can the Minister alleviate concerns over recent reports in the national press about the prevalence of knife crime in our towns and cities? What action are the Government taking to co-ordinate an approach to those offences?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend speaks with bitter and sad experience, given the appalling case in his constituency, and I send my condolences to everybody concerned. It is clear that we are seeing a rise in the use of knives in some of our towns and cities. Some of that information is a result of better police work and increased reporting, but there is no doubt that we have a challenge to face, particularly with our young people. I am glad that the strategy we have set out deals not only with prosecution, but with the root causes of knife crime. We must teach young people about the dangers of knife crime at appropriate times, including both after and before such offences are committed.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The 42.2% rise in knife crime in schools on the mainland is in stark contrast to the one conviction per year in Northern Ireland's schools. What discussions has the Solicitor General had with his devolved counterparts about the approach to juvenile convictions in Northern Ireland?

The Solicitor General: I am interested in the work being done not only in Northern Ireland, but in Scotland, and I am a member of the inter-ministerial group that deals with these issues. We are working with, and obtaining as much information and learning as possible from, the devolved parts of the United Kingdom so that we can improve our approach. This is not just a question of crime; it is a question of health education, and if we deal with it in that way, we might start to crack the problem.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): In Scotland, crimes involving a weapon are down by two thirds since 2007, and the Scottish Government's whole-system approach to youth crime incorporates innovative

approaches from the prosecution service in Scotland, including diversion from prosecution where appropriate. Will the Solicitor General follow Met Commissioner Cressida Dick in coming to Scotland to view the excellent work being done on knife crime there?

The Solicitor General: The hon. and learned Lady develops the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and I would be keen to learn more. I have already started that process by delving into the Scottish experience, and I am glad that the learning and experience in Scotland is being absorbed into thinking and policy development south of the border. I would be happy to take up the hon. and learned Lady's invitation.

Domestic Violence

2. **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the CPS on its effectiveness in prosecuting cases involving domestic violence. [905220]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): I discuss domestic abuse regularly with the CPS, which continues to improve its performance in that area. In the 10 years between 2007 and 2017, the number of convictions secured rose by 61%. The conviction rate rose to its highest ever level of 75.7% last year.

Liz McInnes: I thank the Attorney General for that answer, but he will appreciate that stark regional variations in the rates of prosecution for domestic abuse exist throughout the country. What specific steps will he take to ensure consistency and fairness right across the country?

The Attorney General: The hon. Lady is right to say that there is variation including, as she knows, in the number of cases referred to the CPS by the police. Of course, the CPS cannot prosecute unless a case is referred to it. We must ensure that those variations are understood and ironed out where possible, and the CPS is working closely with the police at a regional and national level to ensure that that happens.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Which regional CPS prosecutes domestic violence the best and which prosecutes it the worst, and will the Attorney General put the two together to compare notes?

The Attorney General: As ever, my hon. Friend finds out the homework that I have not done, but if I can get back to him with those figures, I will. To reinforce the point I made to the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), it is important that the CPS understands where regional variation occurs and the reasons for that and, where possible, we must ensure that lessons from the best are learned by the worst.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Despite the fact that, as we know, far too many victims of domestic violence still do not come forward, the violence against women and girls crime report shows that the overall volume of domestic violence prosecutions fell from 100,913 in 2016 to 93,519 in 2017. Does the Attorney General expect that figure to start rising again this year?

The Attorney General: As I indicated, I think that part of that is to do with referrals. It is important to be clear about what is driving the figures, and I think a large part is those cases that are not referred by the police to the CPS for prosecution at the moment.

The hon. Gentleman raises a good point about the wider picture. It is important that we do all that we can to ensure that victims of domestic violence feel able to come forward to report what has happened to them and that they feel confident that the criminal justice system will deal with them sensitively. He will know that we have put in place a range of measures—not least to enable giving evidence to be somewhat easier—to make sure that that happens.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The Attorney General is right to refer to referrals, but it is important that we do all that we can to ensure that the criminal justice system supports victims. If the figure does not rise in 2018, will he undertake to look again at the domestic abuse guidelines for prosecutors to ensure that we are doing all we possibly can in this area?

The Attorney General: I will certainly do that. It is important that we keep the figures under constant review. The hon. Gentleman will know that the Government are engaged in a consultation, to which we have already had some 800 responses, on the broader picture of domestic abuse. It is important that we look at both legislative and non-legislative options to make sure that across the board we are doing all we can to support victims.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that new technologies such as video evidence give victims of domestic abuse greater access to justice by helping them to come forward and challenge their abusers?

The Attorney General: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is important, where we can, to be sensitive to vulnerable witnesses who do not wish to face the defendant. Through the roll-out of pilots involving pre-recorded cross-examination as well as examination-in-chief, they will be able to get their part in the case over with entirely without going into the court room.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Following prosecution, effective perpetrator interventions, such as those with which I worked before I became an MP—I declare an interest—can help to prevent domestic violence offenders becoming repeat offenders. Will the Attorney General encourage Members across the House to join the all-party group on perpetrator programmes, which I am launching next week?

The Attorney General: I am not sure if I am allowed to do endorsements, Mr Speaker, but I entirely agree with the hon. Lady. What she refers to is incredibly important. I am sure all Members would wish to pay tribute to the work she has done. It is important, because we need to make sure that, across the spectrum of activities we can carry out, we do all that we can to reduce the incidence of domestic abuse before it happens. It is far better, as she says, to do that than to deal with these matters through prosecution. I hope that she will be able to contribute to the consultation that is under way and give it the benefit of her wisdom.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Will the Attorney General speak to colleagues in the Department for Education about the merits of training

more domestic violence specialist social workers, given that about three quarters of child safeguarding cases involve domestic violence? That might help with prevention and provide more information that can lead to successful prosecutions.

The Attorney General: I agree with my hon. Friend, who makes a very good point. It is important that we look at ways in which we can prevent as well as cure through the prosecution process. Social workers have a hugely important part to play and we want to make sure that we work with them.

Unduly Lenient Sentence Scheme

3. **Chris Philp** (Croydon South) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the unduly lenient sentence scheme. [905221]

6. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the unduly lenient sentence scheme. [905225]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): The unduly lenient sentence scheme remains an important avenue for victims, family members and the wider public to ensure that justice is delivered. In 2017, the Solicitor General and I referred 173 cases to the Court of Appeal for consideration. Of those, the Court agreed that 144 sentences were unduly lenient and increased 137 of them.

Chris Philp: I thank the Attorney General for that answer. Will he explain the process by which a referral is made and how decisions are taken, because it is very important that victims' families understand it.

The Attorney General: I agree with my hon. Friend. In the time that we have held our positions, the Solicitor General and I have been very keen to ensure that there are no procedural barriers to prevent anyone making use of the unduly lenient sentence scheme. There is no particular rubric or form that needs to be filled in. All that anyone who is concerned about a criminal sentence needs to do is to contact the Attorney General's office. If the case is within the scheme, we will look at it. What will then happen is that if either the Solicitor General or I believe that a sentence is unduly lenient, we will make a reference to the Court of Appeal. In the end, the Court of Appeal will decide.

Sir Desmond Swayne: All sentences are too lenient. What is the Attorney General going to do to extend the scheme?

The Attorney General: I am not sure that I agree with the first part of my right hon. Friend's question, but in answer to the second part, he will know that the Conservative party has now set out in two successive general election manifestos our commitment to extending the scheme. He will know that we have made a very good start by extending it last August to several additional terrorism offences. He and I both hope that we will be able to go further.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Recently, 26 out of 30 people who were involved in a pack-style attack were sentenced after some excellent work by Humberside police, but my constituents in Grimsby are really alarmed that they have effectively been given a sentence of litter

picking. Does the Attorney General agree that that sends the wrong message about such group attacks on defenceless individuals?

The Attorney General: I understand what the hon. Lady says, but she will understand, of course, that I would need to see a great deal more detail to make a judgment about that sentence. If that is a relatively recent sentence, I encourage her to refer it, if she wishes, to the Law Officers so that we can look at it. I advise her that there is a 28-day statutory time limit after the point of sentence, so if she can, I would ask her to get on with it.

Mr Speaker: If the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) were not already on the Christmas card list of his hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), it is a safe bet that he is now. I call Mr Philip Davies.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I commend the Attorney General and the Solicitor General for what they do in appealing unduly lenient sentences, which they carry out with great skill—I am very impressed by their work. However, the Attorney General said that he hopes that the scheme will be extended, and he also said that we have been promising this for quite some time, so can he give us a date for when we will extend the unduly lenient sentence scheme?

The Attorney General: As I said to the House a moment ago, the scheme has already been extended—a number of terrorism offences have been brought under the scheme—but my hon. Friend knows that I share his enthusiasm for further extension. It seems important to me that victims of crime, and members of the public more broadly, can access the scheme across a broader range of offences so that when mistakes are made, which he will recognise is a rare event in the criminal justice system—about 80,000 criminal cases are heard in the Crown court every year and, as I indicated, 137 sentences were increased last year—they can be remedied.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. learned Friend will be aware of a case that I referred to him, which he said was out of the scope of the scheme. I urge him to look at expanding the scope of the scheme so that justice is done, and is seen to be done, particularly by victims of crime.

The Attorney General: Yes, and for the reasons that my hon. Friend gives, that is exactly what we should do.

Hate Crime

5. **Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to implement the Government's plan to tackle hate crime. [905224]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The Crown Prosecution Service continues to play its part in delivering the cross-Government hate crime action plan. In the last year, 14,480 hate crime prosecutions were completed and the conviction rate was 83.4%.

Simon Hoare: In thanking my hon. and learned Friend for that answer, may I ask him what steps the CPS is taking to improve prosecution rates for disability hate crimes?

The Solicitor General: Disability hate crime has long been a concern of mine, and it is very much the poor relation when it comes to these offences. They are difficult to deal with, because very often victims feel that the incident is part of their normal life and that they should suffer in silence. The message must go out clearly that that should not be the case. I am glad that there has been an increase in prosecutions and an increase in the use of sentencing uplifts, through which judges can increase sentences to reflect aggravating factors such as disability hate.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Tonight, Nottingham Citizens, of which I am a patron, will launch its “Still No Place For Hate” report. It will highlight the fact that almost a third of people surveyed had experienced hate crime related to protected characteristics and that much of that had gone unreported. What assurances can the Attorney General give people in Nottingham that if they do report such crime, it will be prosecuted properly?

The Solicitor General: I welcome the publication of the report to which the hon. Gentleman refers. I went to Nottingham only a few months ago to visit the east midlands Crown Prosecution Service, and I know that if he works with it—either through me or directly—he will find out more about the actions that it is taking. I assure him that it has a structured plan and takes all strands of hate crime extremely seriously.

Director of Public Prosecutions

7. **Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): What progress has been made on the appointment of the Director of Public Prosecutions. [905226]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): The recruitment campaign for the next Director of Public Prosecutions is under way and is due to close on 14 May. The job requires excellent legal judgment, the ability to lead a large organisation and the capacity to work with others in improving the criminal justice system as a whole. This is an exciting time to be joining the Crown Prosecution Service and to play a pivotal role in shaping the organisation for the future.

Jo Stevens: The Attorney General will be aware that many concerns about disclosure have been an issue with the CPS in recent months. Can he confirm that the new DPP will have enough resources to tackle this time-intensive task?

The Attorney General: The hon. Lady knows that I am aware of those concerns, and she also knows that we are looking at disclosure more broadly, as I instituted a review in December last year. She is, however, right to say that one of the primary tasks of the present DPP, as well as the next one, is to get disclosure right throughout the range of cases taken on by the CPS. I will continue to discuss resources with the DPP and, indeed, Government colleagues.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Will the Attorney General bear in mind the widely held opinion that the important, delicate and often finely balanced judgments that the DPP must make require informed views that result from lengthy frontline experience of prosecuting serious cases day in, day out, at the highest level, and that that must be an important consideration when selecting the successor to the current DPP?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend is right. He is aware of the statutory requirement that applicants have at least 10 years’ practising experience, but the matter that he raises will also be an important consideration.

Gangs: Exploitation of Vulnerable People

8. **Gillian Keegan** (Chichester) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to increase its effectiveness in prosecuting crimes involving the exploitation of vulnerable people by gangs. [905228]

9. **James Cleverly** (Braintree) (Con): What steps the CPS is taking to increase its effectiveness in prosecuting crimes involving the exploitation of vulnerable people by gangs. [905229]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The exploitation of vulnerable people to traffic drugs across the country through county lines activity is abhorrent, and the CPS does consider modern slavery legislation when it comes to relevant charging decisions.

Gillian Keegan: In Chichester, drug dealers are regularly taking over the homes of vulnerable people who suffer from mental health problems or from drug dependency themselves in a process known as cuckooing. Sussex police tell me that they struggle to identify the gang leaders who control the cuckoos as they are based outside the county. What steps is the CPS taking to prosecute those gang leaders effectively, so that others are deterred from exploiting the most vulnerable in society?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of cuckooing and the need for local police forces such as Sussex to collaborate with other forces. A good example was a case last month in which two London-based gang members were convicted in Swansea Crown court of trafficking a teenage girl to the city to deal heroin and crack cocaine.

James Cleverly: Essex, being one of the home counties, suffers from the displacement effect of gang activity from London, and we have unfortunately seen pockets—it is only pockets at this stage—of violent gang activity in the county. What financial resources are the Government allocating to tackle serious gang violence?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend has correctly characterised the nature of some of this gang offending. The Government’s serious violence strategy involves a new commitment of £40 million over two years, which includes £11 million for the early intervention youth fund and £3.6 million for the new national county lines co-ordination centre.

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 and Measures:

Laser Misuse (Vehicles) Act 2018
 Financial Guidance and Claims Act 2018
 Secure Tenancies (Victims of Domestic Abuse) Act 2018
 Statute Law (Repeals) Measure 2018
 Pensions (Pre-consolidation) Measure 2018
 Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction and Care of Churches Measure 2018
 Mission and Pastoral etc. Amendment Measure 2018

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): More!

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman wants more. I have news for the hon. Gentleman—he is going to get more. Maybe not much more, but a bit more:

Legislative Reform Measure 2018.

Private Members' Bills: Money Resolutions

10.39 am

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Leader of the House if she will make a statement on the Government's policy on introducing money resolutions for private Members' Bills.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Leader of the House to respond to the urgent question, and in conformity with the recent trend of acknowledging and celebrating birthdays, I am disclosing to the House, because I have been informed, that the Leader of the House's birthday is on Sunday, so we wish her a happy birthday.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): A 21st birthday.

Andrea Leadsom: I could not possibly comment, but I am obviously extremely grateful.

I welcome the opportunity to respond to the question asked by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) ahead of business questions today. I have been clear about the Government's general approach to money resolutions in business questions in recent weeks. On 22 March 2018, I responded to a question from the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), saying:

"Discussions are carrying on through the usual channels and money resolutions will be brought forward on a case-by-case basis as soon as possible."—[*Official Report*, 22 March 2018; Vol. 638, c. 407.]

I am pleased that the Government have been able to bring forward money resolutions for three Bills so far and that a number of important Bills are making progress. We will continue to look at providing money resolutions for those Bills that require them in the usual way and on a case-by-case basis.

With regard to the Bill of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, as the Minister for the Constitution, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), set out at Committee stage yesterday, the Boundary Commission for England began the 2018 parliamentary boundary review in 2016 and is due to report its final recommendations to Government later this year. The Government have a manifesto commitment to continue with this boundary review, and as it has not yet reported, it would not be appropriate to proceed with the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill at this time. The Government will keep this private Member's Bill under review, but it is right that we allow the Boundary Commission to report its recommendations before carefully considering how to proceed.

The financial initiative of the Crown is a long-standing constitutional principle, which means it is for the Government of the day to initiate financial resolutions. As I have said and will continue to say, the Government will bring forward further updates on money resolutions, including for the hon. Gentleman's Bill, in future business statements in the usual way.

Afzal Khan: I thank the Minister for her response.

[Afzal Khan]

I believe the actions of the Government are deeply undemocratic. The private Member's Bill on parliamentary constituencies in my name is of fundamental constitutional importance. It passed Second Reading unanimously. The Government are trying to frustrate the democratic will of Parliament and to block the Bill by procedure.

I do not deny that my Bill is controversial, but it is also reasonable. Whatever arguments can be made for or against it should take place here, between Members and in front of the public, rather than in the backrooms of Government offices. Private Members' Bills are one of the few ways Back-Bench MPs have to make an impact in this place. It is ironic that the Executive are overreaching on a Bill that seeks to defend the power of Back Benchers.

The precedent that the Government are setting will not only block my Bill, but will allow the Government to halt any future private Members' Bill, such as the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill, which passed Second Reading with enormous support from across the House. The Bill Committee meets again next week. Will the Minister reconsider her inconsistent and undemocratic approach to money resolutions and bring one forward today in time for the Committee to fully consider the Bill next week?

This House is owed an explanation of why the Government have taken such an inconsistent and partisan approach to granting money resolutions to private Members' Bills. This is a serious undermining of the rights and privileges of this House by the Executive. It is time the Leader of the House stood up to her Cabinet colleagues on this matter.

Andrea Leadsom: As I have said, a number of private Members' Bills are currently making their way through Parliament. We continue to look at providing money resolutions for those Bills that require them in the usual way, which is on a case-by-case basis. The financial initiative of the Crown is a basic constitutional principle, which means that it is for the Government of the day to initiate financial resolutions. This is a long-standing constitutional principle that is set out in "Erskine May". The Government will keep the hon. Gentleman's private Member's Bill under review, but it is right that we allow the Boundary Commission to report its recommendations before carefully considering how to proceed.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I have to say I agree absolutely with the points made by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan). I think the Government's behaviour is undemocratic and certainly is in breach of the undertakings they gave to the Procedure Committee, which were that, if a Bill got a Second Reading, as night follows day, it would then get a money resolution and the Government would not abuse their power as they are seeking to do now.

Andrea Leadsom: I point out to my hon. Friend that a number of private Members' Bill are going through and a significant number have had a Second Reading. Those are awaiting Committee. They include the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill, the Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Bill, the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation and Liability for Housing Standards)

Bill, the Stalking Protection Bill, the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Bill, the Parking (Code of Practice) Bill, the Organ Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill, the Overseas Electors Bill, the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill and others. It is very important that the Government use their good offices to bring forward money resolutions on a case-by-case basis in line with the long-held constitutional principle that it is for the Government to bring forward money resolutions.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) was right to ask for this urgent question, and you were right to grant it, Mr Speaker.

The Leader of the House knows that Members from all parties raised this matter with her last week, and yet again this week the money resolution was refused. She quotes "Erskine May". It is clear that money resolutions should automatically follow Second Reading. Any tome on the workings of Parliament, whether "Erskine May" or "How Parliament Works", states that they normally follow Second Reading. Not to introduce a money resolution is an unreasonable conclusion that no reasonable decision-making body would come to.

As my hon. Friend said, the will of the House was clear: the Bill got its Second Reading unanimously. The instructions given to the Boundary Commission were constrained and his Bill would do a number of things to those constrained instructions. It would expand the electorate by providing for the use of new electoral registers based on the latest figures following the referendum and the 2017 election. That is reasonable. The old instructions tied the hands of the Boundary Commission by maintaining the arbitrary figure of 600 to 650 Members, on no evidence. That is unreasonable.

This is an unprecedented position. No money resolution has been agreed for my hon. Friend's Bill, yet other Bills behind it have had theirs. All the Bill would do is correct the erroneous instructions to the Boundary Commission. Will the Leader of the House confirm whether the Government are trying to reduce the effectiveness of the legislature as against the overpowering Executive? Will there be a reduction in the payroll vote of MPs? In what circumstances would it be unusual for a money resolution not to follow a Second Reading? If there are no abnormal circumstances in this case, when will one be granted on this important Bill, which goes to the heart of our democracy and the representation of our constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: I understand that the hon. Lady would like the money resolution to be brought forward. She often stands at the Dispatch Box and calls for debates. I should point out that the Government have listened and aimed to bring forward debates on subjects where the Opposition have prayed against statutory instruments. We have also brought forward important debates on subjects such as anti-Semitism and the importance of housing for the next generation. The Government have listened carefully and brought forward proposals from right hon. and hon. Members across the House.

The same is true of private Members' Bills. We have brought forward money resolutions for three Bills so far. Some very important Bills are making progress, and

we will continue to look at providing money resolutions for all those Bills that require them in the usual way and on a case-by-case basis. It is simply not true that this is unprecedented. It is for the Government to decide when to bring forward money resolutions. As my hon. Friend the Constitution Minister has made clear, it is right that we allow the Boundary Commission to report its recommendations before carefully considering how to proceed with this Bill.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Is the Leader of the House as delighted as I am about the progress of important private Members' Bills such as those dealing with assaults on emergency workers? Does not this show how committed the Government are to bringing forward and supporting such Bills where they have the support of the whole House?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Strong progress is being made on a number of Bills, including Bills being brought forward by Opposition Members, such as the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), which has completed all its Commons stages and is now in the other place.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The refusal to give this money resolution demonstrates the massive disrespect that this Government have for the democratic arrangements of this House. Withholding money resolutions like this is just about the lowest of the low; it is a tactic to thwart the democratic progress of Bills that have been passed in this House. And this is not just about the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill; other excellent Bills have been thwarted too, including the excellent Bill from my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) on refugees. When the House has decided on these matters, it is the duty, responsibility and obligation of the Government to honour the wishes of the House.

The Leader of the House has repeated that it is a matter for the Government to give money resolutions to private Members' Bills. Let us take this out of the hands of the Government. Surely it should be an automatic function that a Bill gets a money resolution if it is passed by this House. If she is convinced of her arguments, particularly about boundaries, she should bring them to the House. Let us have a debate on the Floor of the House. Let the Government tell us why they think it is good to cut the number of Members of Parliament when Brexit is coming and the demand on Members will be higher. Let them tell us why they think it is right to have more cronies and donors in the House of Lords while cutting the number of Members of this House. Let us hear the Government's case. Is not this just about the worst possible example of this House taking back control?

Andrea Leadsom: Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman disregards the conventions of this House, as he often does. The financial initiative—[*Interruption.*] The financial initiative of the Crown is a basic constitutional principle, which means that it is for the Government of the day to initiate financial resolutions. That is a long-standing constitutional principle set out in "Erskine May", and he must respect that. I can say to him that 13 private Members' Bills have passed Second Reading and, of

those 13 Bills, one has completed all stages in this House and passed to the Lords and three further Bills have received money resolutions and completed their Committee stages. Those include important Bills such as the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Bill, the Mental Health Units (Use Of Force) Bill and the Prisons (Interference With Wireless Telegraphy) Bill. There is plenty of time left in this extended Session, and further money resolutions will be brought forward in the usual way.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the progress of my private Member's Bill on parental bereavement, which I hope will complete its remaining stages in this House tomorrow?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has the Commons remaining stages of his Bill tomorrow. I know that the Bill has enormous support across the House. It will really make a difference to parents who have been bereaved. It carries a great deal of support and the Government were delighted to bring forward the money resolution for the Bill and will be delighted to see the remaining stages being debated tomorrow.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I have to challenge the Leader of the House on her exposition of the constitutional principles at stake here. She seems to forget that this House has a role in the execution of the Executive's duties in this regard. That is why, every time we have a Budget, a Finance Bill follows it, as sure as night follows day. The purpose of the Government having the power to bring forward a money resolution is to give effect to the will of Parliament, not to thwart it.

Andrea Leadsom: Hon. Members are trying to suggest that the Government are unreasonably withholding money resolutions on a permanent basis, but I have been absolutely clear that they will be brought forward by the Government on a case-by-case basis as necessary. I have tried to explain that the reason that one has not been brought forward for this particular Bill is that the Government have a manifesto commitment to consider the review by the Boundary Commission for England, and we will then consider the right timing for this money resolution.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The Leader of the House has detailed the unusually long list of ballot Bills that are queuing to get into Committee, including the excellent Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Bill in my name. As well as giving clarity on money resolutions, when will she announce the additional sitting Fridays? Is it fit for purpose in 2018 that only one private Member's Bill can be in Committee at a time and that such Committees can sit only on Wednesdays, meaning that many private Members' Bills will inevitably fail? Is it not time we sorted out the whole system so that private Members' Bills get the attention they deserve?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his private Member's Bill. The House has approved 13 sitting Fridays for this Session and, as I have said:

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

"Given...this will be an extended Session, we will...expect to provide additional days".—[*Official Report*, 17 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 636.]

In line with Standing Orders, remaining stages of Bills will be prioritised over Second Reading debates on any additional days provided for private Members' Bills. There are still a number of remaining stages Fridays available for Bills coming out of Committee. The dates available to Members stretch through to 23 November 2018, so at this stage there is no urgency in providing additional days for private Members' Bills. In fact, tabling a motion later in the current Session will allow us to take into account the progress of private Members' Bills, as well as of any new recess dates that are announced.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar is gesticulating in a mildly eccentric fashion. My interpretation of his strange hand signals is that he is indicating a desire to catch an aeroplane. We acknowledge that fact and wish him well on his journey. We would not want to deny him the opportunity to expatiate.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Not just one aeroplane but a second aeroplane on to Benbecula, too. Hence the nerves.

Many people watching will think of this as quite archaic. Money resolutions should really follow automatically. It is also archaic that private Members' Bills have to queue to go into Committee. It is time to modernise the process. We should not be having this urgent question. Night should follow day, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said, and money resolutions should come forward, especially for the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill to give child refugees the same rights as adult refugees.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising those points. I can only say again that the Government will table money resolutions on a case-by-case basis, in line with current conventions.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. Friend suggests that the Government will wait until the boundary commissions have reported, which I understand will be in September or October. Does she intend to wait until after that before granting any further money resolutions so that Bills can make progress in this House?

Andrea Leadsom: No, that is not the case. As my hon. Friend might be aware, a money resolution was tabled for the private Member's Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) just last week.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The Leader of the House did not answer the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) on whether the Government can confirm that they have no plans to cut the number of MPs on their payroll. Can the Leader of the House confirm that the result will be a more powerful Executive and a smaller legislature?

Andrea Leadsom: I reiterate that the Boundary Commission for England began the 2018 parliamentary boundary review in 2016 and is due to report its final recommendations to Government later this year. The Government have a manifesto commitment to continue with the boundary review, which is what we are doing. We will await the Boundary Commission's recommendations, and we will then consider tabling a money resolution on the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill at that point.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on securing the urgent question. He has raised this issue in such a gentle way, but if I had been in his place, I would have been exploding at the Government at the moment. They have said, in answer to the Procedure Committee:

"It is the practice of the Government to accede to such requests."

No ifs and buts there. What we are seeing here is not a debate about democracy; I say, with some trepidation, that this is an abuse of Parliament by this Government. They do not like the Bill, so they are using a procedural tactic which breaks all convention. The Leader of the House has been sent to the wicket not only without a bat, but without pads or a helmet. I cannot say that she does not believe what she is saying, but I believe that if she was free from collective responsibility she would be on our side. I urge her at business questions to follow to grant the money resolution.

Andrea Leadsom: I gently remind my hon. Friend that he, too, stood on a manifesto that was committed to hearing the Boundary Commission review—

Mr Bone: No, I opposed it—

Mr Speaker: Order. I take the point. The hon. Gentleman's comment that he opposed it is clearly on the record, and so it should be, but the Leader of the House is answering and she should be free to continue to do so.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend stood on a manifesto that led to this Government forming, and it is clear—I have made it as clear as possible—that once the recommendations have been considered, we will be looking to bring forward that money resolution.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): As I understand it, the Leader of the House is meant to be the House's representative in Cabinet. I hate to burst her bubble, but the Conservative party did not win the general election and there was nothing in its manifesto about passing a bung to the Democratic Unionist party to prop it up on the boundary review. May I ask the Leader of the House, most sincerely, what representations she is making to Cabinet and to the Government to make sure that the will of this House is granted and the money resolution tabled?

Andrea Leadsom: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that it is extraordinary that he thinks that this Government did not win the general election, because this is the Government and this Government are winning votes. This Government are taking charge of running the country, in full collaboration right across the House

with all right hon. and hon. Members, to ensure that we take all views into account. That is what I undertook to do as Leader of the House of Commons and it is what I do every day.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): As a former Lord Commissioner and officer of Her Majesty's Household, I know exactly how inconvenient and unhelpful the happy thoughts of private Members' Bills can be, and this one is no exception. The answer has to be to turn up on a Friday and vote against them, not to deny them a money resolution.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his comments. I absolutely agree that private Members' Bills are a matter for Fridays and parliamentary voting, but it is also a constitutional principle that the Government bring forward money resolutions and do so on a case-by-case basis. I will continue to make those announcements at business questions in the usual way.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for the fact that we eventually got a money resolution for the Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Bill, but that was only after a seven-week delay, during which time the Government repeatedly promised that the money resolution would be laid. The Committee to consider the Bill was convened but had to be cancelled or adjourned at short notice because the money resolution had not been laid. On one occasion, the Government claimed pressure of business, even though on the relevant date the House had adjourned early because of a lack of business. This is disrespectful, not only to the House, but to interested parties outside it, who are keenly following the progress of these Bills. One would normally associate pantomimes with Christmas, but the Government treated us to one this Easter. Surely this is no way to run the business of the House.

Andrea Leadsom: It is a bit of a shame the hon. Gentleman does not celebrate, as all Members should, the fact that the Committee stage is now complete for his Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Bill, which is an important piece of legislation. The money resolution was brought forward; his private Member's Bill is making progress; and, with the support of the House, he can hope to see it come into law.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I know it is inconvenient for Her Majesty's Government, but the right of individual Members to initiate legislation is a precious one, and it is denied to MPs in many other Parliaments around the world. If I may say so, the Leader of the House may be confusing the tabling of a money resolution with its decision in the House. As the representative of the House in Cabinet, surely it should be the Leader of the House's role to table a money resolution straight after Second Reading has been agreed. It is then up to the House to divide to decide whether that money resolution should be passed. By not even tabling the resolution, she is denying a democratic right to Members of this House.

Andrea Leadsom: I say gently to my hon. Friend that the financial initiative of the Crown is a basic constitutional principle; it is for the Government of the day to initiate financial resolutions. It is a long-standing constitutional principle and it is set out in "Erskine May".

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Does the Leader of the House believe that the delays in the granting of money resolutions for private Members' Bills that have had their Second Reading are a result of the Government's inefficiency or their incompetence? How long does she believe it is reasonable to wait for a money resolution?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted that money resolutions have been brought forward for some excellent private Member's Bills, and more will be brought forward in due course.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The Leader of the House is trying to defend the indefensible, and I regret that she has been sent in to do that. I urge her, rather than getting bogged down in some constitutional niceties that do not appear to be winning the day, just to agree to grant the money resolution for the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan). That is the clear will of the House, so she should just be done with the matter.

Andrea Leadsom *rose*—

Philip Davies: While we are on the point, and before she leaps to her feet, I urge her to resist the call for extra sitting Fridays in this Session. You will know better than me, Mr Speaker, but I think the Standing Orders say that there shall be 13 sitting days on a Friday in a Session—not a minimum of 13, but that there shall be 13. Can we please stick to that particular Standing Order?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend clearly does not agree with all Members. He asserts what all Members think, but then clearly disagrees with what I have heard many Members say, which is that they want further days to discuss private Members' Bills. That is why it is important that private Members' Bills have support from the whole House. I absolutely assure my hon. Friend that money resolutions for Bills will be brought forward in the usual way, on a case-by-case basis.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Does this not show up the whole private Members' Bills system for the farce that it is? It was described as a cruel system in the most recent Procedure Committee report on the matter, which made some fundamental, positive and progressive suggestions for reform, not least that the Backbench Business Committee should allocate some of the time for Bills that genuinely have support throughout the whole House, like we see in progressive Parliaments such as the Scottish Parliament in Holyrood. Will the Leader of the House make time for those proposals to be debated in the House of Commons?

Andrea Leadsom: There was a review of private Members' Bills not very long ago, and the strong view from all parts of the House at the time was that private Members' Bills do work. Obviously, individual Members have different views, as we have just heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). Different Members have different views about private Members' Bills, but the Government seek to ensure that when there is strong enough support for private Members' business, it has the chance to come into law.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Having been drawn in the private Member's Bill ballot myself, I know the frustration that constituents express when Bills run out of time on Fridays. Surely this additional step, whereby the Government can by procedural means block the unanimous will of this House, can only damage the reputation of politics.

Andrea Leadsom: That is simply not the case. The Government are not blocking. I have set out a clear reason why a money resolution for the Bill has not yet been brought forward. Other money resolutions have been brought forward, and more will be in due course.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The Leader of the House has continually referred to the fact that the boundary review appeared in the Conservative manifesto last year; should we therefore expect to have Bills on foxhunting and grammar schools introduced in the House on a future date?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is asking about an entirely separate issue. I am trying to explain, with absolute courtesy to the House, the reason why a money resolution has not been brought forward in this case, and she is raising an entirely different issue.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The Leader of the House keeps referring to the Boundary Commission's proposals. Can she tell me when the last census was taken? Can she also tell me how many would be excluded if she continues with the boundary proposals and how that will not be seen as gerrymandering?

Mr Speaker: Forgive me, it may be a question of very considerable interest, but it is not altogether adjacent to the matter of money resolutions. However, if the Leader of the House wants to give us the benefit of her views on the matter, I am sure that we will all listen with rapt attention.

Andrea Leadsom *indicated dissent.*

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): May I gently remind the Leader of the House that she is supposed to represent this House in Cabinet? Why is she allowing a procedural finagle to block the democratic decision of this House?

Andrea Leadsom: I take my role of representing Parliament in the Government incredibly seriously. At every Business questions and at every opportunity, I seek to take into account all the views expressed across this House. I can give the hon. Gentleman countless examples of successes there, but what I am simply setting out today is that the money resolution for this particular private Member's Bill will be brought forward at a later stage, once the review of the Boundary Commission for England has been considered.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I understand what the Leader of the House has just said, but does she not accept that, to the people whom we represent, this will look like she is actually the Cabinet's representative to the legislature? We need action on this and on so many other private Members' Bills so that the people whom we represent can truly feel that we are able to represent them on the issues that matter to them.

Andrea Leadsom: I think people will be delighted at the progress being made in some very important private Members' Bills, including Bills to prevent assaults on emergency workers, to provide better support for parents who have been bereaved and to provide better support for those who have mental health problems and are taken into secure units.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Does the Leader of the House not understand just how offensive it is to Members of this House that the Government are using a procedural device to block debate on this important Bill?

Andrea Leadsom: I say to the hon. Lady, as I have to plenty of hon. Members now, there is no blocking. The Government bring forward money resolutions on a case-by-case basis. I have sought very courteously to explain why, on this occasion, money resolutions on other private Members' Bills are coming forward and this one is not at the moment.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I urge the Leader of the House not to trot out the manifesto commitment line, given how many pledges have been dropped already. I remind her that her party does not command a majority in this House, so why does she think that it is okay to override the democratic will of this Chamber?

Andrea Leadsom: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that his party does not command a majority in this House, and that, therefore, what we seek to do in this Parliament is to listen broadly across the House to all the proposals made by right hon. and hon. Members and to accommodate them wherever we can.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It has become quite clear over the past 35 minutes that the Minister has been sent out to defend the indefensible, as my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) quite rightly said. I urge her to take note of the exchanges that we have had over the past half hour and give a commitment to come back next week, having reflected on those views, with perhaps a slightly different view.

Andrea Leadsom: I am always well educated by the exchanges in this place, and I always continue to listen carefully and to reflect on what is said.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): On Wednesday morning, we saw an absurd spectacle. We had a Committee full of hon. Members ready to take on this Bill at its next stage, following overwhelming support on Second Reading, but we were prevented from doing so. We were prevented by a Government who were not brave enough to make the case against it and not secure enough to divide on the matter, so, instead, they hid behind procedure. Does the Leader of the House really think that it is satisfactory for the Government to frustrate the will of the House in this way?

Andrea Leadsom: The Minister for the Constitution, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), clearly set out in Committee yesterday that "the Boundary Commission for England began the 2018 parliamentary boundary review in 2016. It is due to report its final recommendations later this year...it would not, therefore, be appropriate to proceed with the Parliamentary Constituencies

(Amendment) Bill...at this time by providing it with a money resolution.”—[*Official Report, Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Public Bill Committee*, 9 May 2018; c. 5-6.]

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): This points to a much wider problem with the farcical and outdated system of dealing with private Members' Bills in this House, including the farcical scenes that we often see on sitting Fridays. More importantly, does the Leader of the House really think that it is appropriate in this day and age that a private Member should have to rely on the patronage and support of the Government to get a private Member's Bill through Parliament?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman knows that that is not the case. Private Members' Bill require support from across the House in order to get through. The Government provide money resolutions on a case-by-case basis.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I like the Leader of the House a great deal but I think that in this case she is wrong. A little bit of humility about the fact that the Conservatives did not win the general election and did not command a majority for their manifesto would go a long way in this House. There is a clear will in Parliament on what should happen. I hope that the words of the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) will be ringing in the ears of the Leader of the House and that she will come back to the House with a proper money resolution that we can debate.

Andrea Leadsom: I am always grateful to the hon. Lady for her interventions and for the measured way in which she puts her points. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), I always reflect very carefully on all instructions given from this Chamber.

Business of the House

11.16 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): There is something of the groundhog day about this. The business for the week commencing 14 May will include:

MONDAY 14 MAY—Second Reading of the Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 15 MAY—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by the remaining stages of the Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Bill, followed by a general debate on housing and homes.

WEDNESDAY 16 MAY—Opposition day (11th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 17 MAY—Debate on a motion on plastic bottles and coffee cups, followed by a general debate on International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 18 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 21 May will include:

MONDAY 21 MAY—Consideration of Lords amendments, followed by Second Reading of the Tenant Fees Bill.

You were kind enough, Mr Speaker, to host the Grenfell survivors in Speaker's House this week. I pay tribute to their courage in sharing their personal stories with us. None of us can imagine the pain and suffering experienced by all those caught up in that tragic event last year, and I reiterate the commitment of the Government and Parliament to doing everything we can to ensure that such a terrible tragedy never happens again.

Yesterday was important for two reasons. First, it was Teacher Appreciation Day, so I would like to say a big thank you to all the hard-working teachers and school staff who make such a difference to the lives of young people every single day. Secondly, it was also Europe Day. As a proud European myself, I join the millions across our continent celebrating our strong ties of friendship and shared history.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the forthcoming business. I am not going to ask her for a money resolution for the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), because we have had that debate, but is it too much to hope that the amendments coming back from the Lords next week will have anything to do with the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill? The Bill has been given such thoughtful consideration by the other place, so will the Leader of the House confirm that the House will be able to debate the amendments soon? If not, will she confirm whether the reports in the press that the EU withdrawal Bill will not come before the House again until after negotiations are complete in the autumn are accurate?

When will the so-called customs Bill—the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill—and the Trade Bill have their Report stage and Third Reading, and, more importantly,

[Valerie Vaz]

when will the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill be introduced? Can the Leader of the House confirm that the Government are not being cynical and parking the Trade Bill, the customs Bill and the EU withdrawal Bill, and introducing the legislation to enact EU law under the withdrawal and implementation Bill after the negotiations are complete so as to avoid any rebellions? She will know that all this legislation can return at any time before the end of the Session, which is now May 2019. This is unprecedented, and the Government are effectively subverting democracy. They said that they wanted to extend the Session of Parliament owing to a heavy burden of legislation, yet they are not tabling any important legislation.

The subversion of democracy continued, and showed its true colours, in the local elections. The pilot areas trialling controversial voter ID checks have been a shambles. Early estimates show that nearly 4,000 people were turned away from voting in the local elections. In one case that I know of, someone was actually told that his polling station had moved and he could not vote at all. Analysis by the Electoral Reform Society said that millions of people could be disenfranchised if the scheme is rolled out across the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), the shadow Minister for voter engagement, warned of this before the pilot was rolled out. She would like to see the report come back before she goes on maternity leave.

You were in the Chamber, Mr Speaker, when the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) raised a point of order, again on the subversion of democracy, about a dysfunctional Government and their malfunctioning email address for a consultation that closes on 25 May. Will the Leader of the House look into this to see whether the email address now works and to ensure that the people of Buckinghamshire have a say? It is nothing personal, Mr Speaker, but the Government do not seem to want to hear from you or your constituents.

As there is hardly any Government business, or rather the Government do not wish to table any legislation relating to the EU, will the Leader of the House find time to debate the statutory instrument prayed against by my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan)? It relates to the treatment of victims of torture and other vulnerable people in immigration detention centres and is the subject of early-day motion 1200, which was signed by 110 Members.

[That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Immigration (Guidance on Detention of Vulnerable Persons) Regulations 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 410), dated 22 March 2018, a copy of which was laid before this House on 27 March, be annulled.]

In addition, EDM 1202 was signed by 107 Members.

[That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Detention Centre (Amendment) Rules 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 411), dated 22 March 2018, a copy of which was laid before this House on 27 March, be annulled.]

May we have a debate on racism in the Tory party? I have to read this out, Mr Speaker, because it is so obnoxious. A councillor posted this:

"I took my dog to the dole office to see what he was entitled to. The bloke behind the counter said 'you idiot, we don't give benefits to dogs'. I argued 'why not? He's brown, he stinks, he's never worked'"

an F

"day in his life & he can't speak"

an F

"word of English". The man replied: 'His first payment will be Monday'."

That councillor has been allowed back on to the council so that the Tory party can retain its power in Pendle. What is the position on Pendle council? Is the councillor a full member of the council and the Tory group? Where are the Government voices of condemnation, and when can we have that debate on racism?

On restoration and renewal, last week the Leader of the House said that the Commission decided on governance arrangements. She actually misses the point. It is not about us on the Commission; it is about Members knowing what is going on. Members are not aware of these agreed arrangements. The Leader of the House said during the debate on 31 January:

"This is a matter for Parliament".—[Official Report, 31 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 888.]

All the Commission published online was a simple sentence saying that it has

"agreed the proposed governance arrangements for the R&R Programme",

but the details are not given. A written statement published on 28 February does not give the full details of what was announced in the article in *The House* magazine. When will she make a statement to the House on the proposals for restoration and renewal?

I join you, Mr Speaker, in wishing the Leader of the House a very happy birthday. She mentioned that it was Europe Day yesterday, but there was no mention of that by the Prime Minister. We know that Europe stands for peace, co-operation, opportunity and respect for the human rights of everyone. In or out, that is how we in the Opposition mark Europe Day. I wish everyone a belated happy Europe Day, and the Leader of the House a very happy birthday on Sunday.

Andrea Leadsom: First, the hon. Lady asks about progress of Brexit legislation. Third Reading of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will take place in the other House next week, and then we will bring that Bill back to this place, to look at the amendments. The Government are obviously looking closely at the proposals made in the other House, as we have done with all those made in this House. Other Brexit Bills will be coming forward in due course. There is no hold-up. As all hon. Members will appreciate, very complex negotiations are under way, and it is right that we bring forward these Bills at the appropriate time, as indeed we will do.

The hon. Lady asks about voter ID. Voter ID was successfully tested at the local elections on 3 May in five local authorities, each of which had signed up to it. The data so far and statements by the respective returning officers point towards the pilots successfully testing voter ID and the experience being overwhelmingly positive. It is important to note that it cannot be the case that we have to provide ID to pick up a parcel but not to cast our democratic vote. It is vital that we protect our democracy from potential fraud, and we will obviously look at all lessons learned from that.

The hon. Lady asked about the Home Secretary's email address. I am not sure that that is within my brief, but if email addresses now come under the remit of the Leader of the House, I am happy to take that up if she writes to me about it.

The hon. Lady asked about statutory instruments that the Opposition have prayed against. It is parliamentary convention that, where a reasonable request for a debate is made, time will be allowed for a debate, and in line with that, the Government have sought to accommodate reasonable requests from the Opposition. There have been a couple of debates on statutory instruments only this week, and more Government time has been given for debates on statutory instruments prayed against by the Opposition than at any time since 1997. I hope she will acknowledge that the Government are doing everything they can to accommodate Opposition views.

The hon. Lady asked about the issue of racism in Pendle. I am horrified to hear that story, and I certainly share her absolute rejection of any form of racism. As I understand it, direct action was taken—suspension, training, apologies and so on—but I am not completely aware of the situation. I am sure she will acknowledge that if people who do something in very bad taste have received their punishment, they should be capable of being reinstated. I am not sure of the case, but like her, I utterly reject any form of racism.

Finally, the hon. Lady asked about restoration and renewal. We have a House of Commons Commission meeting on Monday evening, where there will be further discussions. I am always happy to update the House, and perhaps we can discuss how we can facilitate that.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): Mr Speaker, given your manifesto commitment to go by 22 June, may we have a debate in Government time about what we want from a Speaker and what type of Speaker we want, before we move to a secondary discussion about who we want to replace you?

Andrea Leadsom: Mr Speaker, you have served this House for a good number of years, in the best way that you can, and I am grateful to you for that. I am not sure that a debate on the subject that my hon. Friend suggests would be at all welcome.

Mr Speaker: I very gently say to the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), in terms which are very straightforward and which I know he will be fully able to understand, that after each general election, the proposition about the Speaker returning to the Chair is put, and it is then voted upon by the House. He will recall that I indicated my willingness to continue in the Chair in June of last year. That proposition was put to the House, and it was accepted unanimously. If he had wanted to oppose it, he could have done so, but simply as a matter of fact—I am not making any criticism, nor favourable comment—I remind the House that he did not.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Long may that proposition continue, Mr Speaker.

I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. As she is always so generous in wishing us all a happy birthday, I wish her a boundary-free birthday, and a signed copy of the MP4 CD is on its way.

It has been a crazy old week for the Government. Apparently, the customs partnership favoured by the Prime Minister is not the preferred option of the Foreign Secretary, who has used characteristically conciliatory language to express his concern. He could have called the customs plan clueless, delusional or unworkable, but, no; for him, it is just plain crazy. I had a look at the dictionary definition of “crazy”, and apparently it means deranged, demented, non compos mentis, unhinged or as mad as a hatter. I think the Foreign Secretary might be on to something here. However, can we have a statement to clarify exactly what someone has to say now to be sacked as Foreign Secretary?

You know, Mr Speaker, that I am not the greatest fan of our undemocratic be-ermined friends down the corridor, and, okay, I have called them a few things in the past—donors, cronies, placemen, aristocrats—but even I have never stooped so low as to call them traitors, as happened on the front page of the Tories' favourite rag, the obnoxious *Daily Mail*. May we have a statement on what type of language we could use to describe what goes on in our political life?

It looks like it is the beginning of the end for our lordships—not for being an unelected embarrassment, but for doing the right thing. So I say to the Lords, the Government are probably going to abolish you now, so stand up to them. When it gets to ping-pong, do your own thing. Go down fighting, and make that ermine count for something!

Andrea Leadsom: First, I must say that I would be so thrilled with a copy of MP4's latest disc or cassette—what would it be? I am also slightly hearing from the hon. Gentleman that he is now after a seat in the other place—I am detecting a level of warmth towards it that I have never seen from him before.

Seriously, however, there is a concern. The other place provides a fantastic revising House to improve legislation, and it has made significant improvements to the EU withdrawal Bill, which the Government have willingly accepted, including on looking at the Bill as it relates to the devolved nations. It is very important that we have done that, and it is great to see the progress with the Welsh Government, who have been willing to accept the latest proposals, although it is a great shame the Scottish Government have not been willing to do so, and we hope they will be able to in due course. The purpose of the other place is not to undermine the will of this House or, very importantly, the will of the majority of people in this country who voted for the United Kingdom to leave the EU.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Most people would think it is absolutely pathetic that a picture of the Prime Minister was removed from a wall at one of our leading universities that showed women of achievement. Will my right hon. Friend please find time for a wider debate on issues surrounding freedom of expression and freedom of speech in our universities, on whose rock a more tolerant society should be built?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend's description of that as pathetic is just about right. I could not believe that a university would seek to remove a photograph of one of its most successful alumni—that is absolutely appalling. Universities have a statutory duty to ensure

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

free speech for staff, students and visiting speakers. Institutions should ensure that there is no unlawful harassment, intimidation or threats of violence, but anything else is legal free speech. I certainly think all women in our country should be proud of the fact that we have our second female Prime Minister, regardless of whether they agree with her policies.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement. May I, too, wish her a very happy birthday for Sunday? I am sure the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) will also send her a Betamax video tape of MP4 playing, along with the cassette that he is going to send.

Will we be getting Thursday 24 May for Backbench Business? We have business that could fill the slots then, if they are available. Last week, I also mentioned 14 June, which would be in the week leading up to the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the Windrush. It is proposed that a debate on Windrush would happen on that date in Backbench time, if time was available.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his birthday wishes. As ever, I will of course seek to accommodate his requests.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for so robustly defending the rights of Back Benchers on both sides of the House. Will my right hon. Friend postpone the sitting, scheduled for Monday, of the Delegated Legislation Committee at which the Government propose to abolish Christchurch Borough Council, against the will of the citizens of Christchurch? I ask my right hon. Friend to do so because Christchurch Borough Council, on the advice of leading counsel, has issued a letter before action against the Government, and the Government have asked for extra time in which to respond to that letter. It seems to me that it is reasonable for us to see the Government's written response to the letter before action before Back Benchers are asked to vote on this issue, and I hope she will agree that that is a perfectly reasonable request. The Government cannot have it both ways: they cannot delay issuing a decision while at the same time asserting that what they are doing is absolutely right.

Andrea Leadsom: I do not know whether you have any particular constitutional view on this matter, Mr Speaker, but I am certainly unaware of the specifics. I will have to seek advice on it, and come back to my hon. Friend.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the Leader of the House, although I was not looking to come in on this matter. The timing on this subject—in terms of where the power lies—is a matter for the Government. Ultimately, it is for the Leader of the House and others to make a judgment about what seems right and reasonable, in the light of the prospective legal action and of the view, just put, of the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope). The Chair would not seek to intercede.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May I gently correct the Leader of the House? She described this as groundhog day, but as you will know,

Mr Speaker, groundhog day is actually on 2 February. It is a superstition that if the groundhog emerges from its burrow and sees a shadow, then winter continues for a further six weeks. The Trade Bill and the customs Bill—the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill—emerged from their burrows in Committee on 1 February, well over six weeks ago, so even if we were working on the groundhog principle, we should have had them back on the Floor of the House by now. When are we going to see them?

Andrea Leadsom: I really enjoyed the film of that title, which was about the day repeating itself. [*Interruption.*] Yes, it probably was on video tape at the time.

In answer to the right hon. Gentleman's very clear question, a very complex negotiation is under way, as he will know, and at the same time there is a necessity to legislate. We look very carefully at all amendments that are brought forward, and we try to make sure that we do not get ahead of the negotiation or indeed of policy proposals coming from the Government. The timing is therefore very much subject to the overall consideration of the best way in which we can leave the European Union with a good deal for both the United Kingdom and for our EU friends and neighbours.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): We plant trees for those born later—they are totems of enduring certainty—so the whole House will have been alarmed to hear that Network Rail is to spend £800 million felling 1 million of them. Trees have adorned railway lines, providing a habitat for wildlife and adding to the aesthetic efficacy of journeys, since the time of Stephenson. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement by the Environment Secretary or perhaps by the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), who has helpfully delayed this, so that Network Rail can reconsider this violent decision, which is either careless or crass? Those born later deserve better.

Andrea Leadsom: I completely share my right hon. Friend's love of trees. I understand that Ministers have called for a review of the decision to fell this number of trees. I also understand that Network Rail is responsible for some 13 million trees and that it is seeking to ensure maximum safety for rail passengers. Nevertheless, my right hon. Friend makes a very good point, and he will be aware that Ministers are already looking into this matter.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Leader of the House will agree that a key part of the northern powerhouse involves equipping our young people with the skills and qualifications they need for the new industries that we have been attracting to Hull, particularly the renewables industry. Hull College is currently experiencing strike action over so-called “fresh start” plans to cut courses, reduce student tuition time and axe 231 jobs to address a £10 million deficit. May we have a debate on the distribution of further education funding and whether that is helping or hindering the objectives of the northern powerhouse?

Andrea Leadsom: I entirely support and share the hon. Lady's enthusiasm for the superb actions taking place in Hull and other nearby areas regarding renewables, and particularly in getting young people the skills they

need to have a worthwhile career in that area. The Government have sought to make it easier for more young people to go into higher and further education by removing the cap on further education numbers. The specific point raised by the hon. Lady would lend itself to an Adjournment debate, so that she can raise those problems directly with Ministers.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): May we have a statement on what progress has been made towards ensuring the release of Leah Sharibu, who is currently being held hostage in Nigeria?

Andrea Leadsom: This is a very harrowing case, and our thoughts are with Leah Sharibu and her family. The Government of Nigeria have assured the public that all efforts are being deployed to secure her return. The Foreign Secretary spoke to the Nigerian Vice-President on 26 February and offered additional UK assistance, following the abductions from Dapchi. We continue to call for the release of the remaining Chibok girls and all those abducted by Boko Haram. Attacks on schools and abductions of children are abhorrent and must stop.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I have recently been made aware of an indefensible situation in my constituency. It concerns a young couple—he is aged 25, and she is 17. Because she is only 17, she does not qualify for universal credit, yet her partner cannot include her in his claim. However, since she has a part-time job, that reduces his claim. That is completely unacceptable. It is grossly unfair if a person is denied access to support because of their age, and it is also unfair to expect their income to reduce their partner's claim. May we have a debate in Government time to discuss young people and their place within the welfare system? We must end this unfair treatment and ensure that common sense prevails in such cases.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an important constituency case, and she will be aware that the Government have been trying to promote apprenticeships and higher education for young people, to enable them to get the skills to have a good career with a decent income and to provide for themselves and their families. She raises a specific point about universal credit and its application to young people, and she might like to raise her constituency case during questions to the Department for Work and Pensions on 21 May.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): My constituents in Stirling are concerned about the state of Scotland's economy, and this week it was revealed that the SNP Scottish Government have missed five major economic targets—targets they set for themselves—which has cost Scotland more than £80 billion. May we have a debate on the prosperity of the nations and regions of the United Kingdom?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend rightly raises the important issue of the comparative performance of Scotland under the Scottish nationalists versus the performance of England. Our Budget delivered a £2 billion boost to the Scottish Government's budget, so that by 2020 the block grant will have grown to more than £31 billion before adjustments for tax devolution. That

is a real-terms increase, and I encourage my hon. Friend to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can tackle his concerns head-on.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): May we debate discrimination against women in golf clubs? My constituent Lowri Roberts wanted to play golf on a Saturday, but she was banned from doing so because she was a woman. After she complained in the media, she was suspended from Cottrell Park golf course in the Vale of Glamorgan. Is that not an absolute disgrace in this day and age?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate to see what more can be done to sort out this ridiculous incident.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): After this harsh winter, the menace of potholes is becoming much more than a minor nuisance in West Oxfordshire, and not just on the A40, which in any event requires major upgrades, but across the whole of my rural area. Oxfordshire County Council is fixing tens of thousands of potholes a year, but has the time not come for a full debate across the whole House to discuss the way forward?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his constituency and I congratulate him on his work both on congestion and potholes in his area. I am sure he will be as delighted as I am that he and his colleagues, including my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), have managed to achieve nearly £500,000 in extra pothole action funding for 2018-19 in Oxfordshire. Nevertheless, he is right to raise this issue and I suggest he perhaps seeks a Backbench business debate, because potholes are a menace everywhere.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Is it not time for the Government to have a binding vote to address the injustice of 1950s-born women, like my constituent Heather Cameron, a teacher who has had to retire early? Does the Leader of the House not agree that it is now time to put this injustice to bed?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there have been a number of debates on this subject and the Government have moved significantly to restrict any losses suffered by women who were born at that particular time. If he wants to raise a further debate on the subject, I encourage him to seek a Westminster Hall debate.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): As the Leader of the House is aware, Public Works Loan Board funds can be used by local councils to borrow money at a very cheap rate. Taunton Deane Borough Council is borrowing £16 million to build a brand new hotel with no operator. We must have an urgent debate on cheap borrowing and the way that Government funds are being used to prop up local government.

Andrea Leadsom: The Government have been very keen to help and support local areas to make decisions that are in the interests of their local communities and local residents. We will continue to do so.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As recently as the past weekend, there have been reports of armed Fulani herders committing violent attacks in Nigeria. According to the African Centre for Strategic Studies, over 60,000 people have died in Fulani herder-related violence since 2001. Over the past three years, the Fulani herder militia is thought to have killed more people than Boko Haram. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or a debate on this very pressing issue as soon as possible?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an incredibly concerning issue, and I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so he can raise it directly with Ministers.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): A constituent of mine has raised the issue of price manipulation of gold and silver bullion. There have been several cases in the United States which have resulted in considerable fines on banks. May we have a debate on this very important issue, because gold and silver are not merely a store of value, but have extremely important uses in manufacturing and, in the case of silver, as a kind of antibiotic?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. I absolutely sympathise with the fact that it is vital that we do not allow the manipulation of any particular markets. I encourage him to take this issue up directly, perhaps at Treasury questions on 22 May.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): In this year as we celebrate 100 years of women's suffrage, will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating my constituent Masudah Ali on being voted 12th in the top future 100 women across UK universities? Will she agree to have a debate on talented young women and the role they can play in public life?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely join my hon. Friend in congratulating Masudah Ali, her constituent. That is fantastic. To be predicted to be one of the future 100 female leaders is an amazing thing to achieve—all congratulations to her. I think there will be many opportunities this year to debate the achievements and the prospects for women in this 100 years of female suffrage.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming the Tour Series bike race to Redditch this evening? It is a testament to the hard work of Worcestershire County Council and Redditch Borough Council, which, as she will be aware, has converted to Conservative control this year after a historic victory. As we work to further unlock Redditch's potential, does she agree that our record of hosting world-class sporting events means that we are well placed to benefit from the Commonwealth games, which are taking place in Birmingham, just up the road from us? May we have a debate in this place about how we spread the benefits of hosting the Commonwealth games across the whole west midlands area?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate my hon. Friend again on her triumph at the local elections—it was great news for her and for her constituents. I am sure that getting that particular cycling event into her area was in part due to her work, so I congratulate her on that. She is right to raise the question how the benefits from the

arrival of the Commonwealth games can be spread across the whole area, and I encourage her to perhaps seek an Adjournment debate or to raise the matter with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to make sure that everybody benefits from the fantastic hosting of those games.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I have met a number of constituents who have been subject to online abuse, including one woman who spoke about resorting to using a food bank on the BBC's "Question Time" and was hounded online. May we have an urgent debate in Government time about how we tackle the vile practice of online abuse?

Andrea Leadsom: I am really sorry to hear about the hon. Lady's constituent. That is absolutely appalling, and unfortunately it is all too regular an occurrence. I agree that it would be a good thing for this House to debate; she might like to seek a Backbench business debate. She will be aware that the Government are taking action through the Law Commission review to ensure that everything that is illegal offline is also illegal online.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Notable among the successful candidates in the North East Lincolnshire Council elections were Callum Procter and Oliver Freeston, because of their relative youth. Indeed, the *Grimshy Telegraph* reports that Oliver Freeston is the youngest councillor in the country—he now represents Croft Baker ward in Cleethorpes. May we have a debate in Government time to look at how we encourage young people to stand for elected office?

Andrea Leadsom: Congratulations to Oliver Freeston and to my hon. Friend on the success in the local elections. He is exactly right: we do want to encourage more people to come into Parliament. As we often discuss, it is vital to ensure that people feel that they can be respected and are not threatened or abused online or in person when they decide that they want to put themselves forward to support and represent their constituents and to make this world of ours a better place.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): When will we see a Government decision on the maximum stakes for fixed odds betting terminals? *The Times* reports today that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has stymied progress on dealing with these addictive betting machines.

Andrea Leadsom: We all want to see more steps taken to prevent and to get rid of the problem of gambling addiction. The Government will come forward soon with our proposed recommendations following the consultation that has been taking place.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): As my right hon. Friend may be aware, Angus Council is due to remove Stracathro Primary School from the consultation on the closure of rural schools. This is in no small part down to the vibrant campaign by my local constituents and parents from the school, and I fully endorse that campaign. Will my right hon. Friend agree to a debate in this House about the importance of community engagement?

Andrea Leadsom: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. She is a very strong voice for her constituents, and I am very happy to congratulate the parents and pupils of the schools on the successful campaign that they have run.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): May we have an urgent debate on the provision of extra care housing? Tory-controlled Nottinghamshire County Council has just announced the closure of five of its care homes across the whole of the county, including one, Leivers Court, in Arnold in my constituency. This is at a time when there is a shortage of such housing. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people across the country are in hospitals because they are unable to be discharged into these types of facilities. It is a real problem, and the reason that the county council is doing this is that it saves it £4.3 million.

Andrea Leadsom: I am very concerned to hear about that. The hon. Gentleman may wish to seek an Adjournment debate to raise it directly with Ministers. As he knows, however, the Prime Minister's personal domestic priority is new housing for all types of people, whether they need extra care or are just starting out on the housing ladder. That is a top priority for the Government, and we are making progress with it.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Your own Speaker's whisky, Mr Speaker, is distilled in Speyside, in my constituency. We recently had another very successful Spirit of Speyside Whisky Festival, at which 116 events were sold out within 24 hours. May we have a debate on whisky tourism? That would allow me to thank the chairman of the festival, James Campbell, for the excellent work that he and others do and to congratulate all the award winners, including Ian Urquhart and Laurie Piper.

Andrea Leadsom: Let me extend my congratulations to Ian Urquhart and Laurie Piper on their successes and congratulate my hon. Friend on raising a very important issue. The whisky industry is the United Kingdom's largest single food and drink sector and accounts for 80% of Scottish food and drink exports. Having had the great pleasure of touring some of Scotland's finest food and drink businesses, including a visit to the Scotch Whisky Association, I absolutely concur with him that these superb products are vital to the UK economy.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): In Swansea, the UK Government have cut £1.7 billion of rail investment, breaking David Cameron's promise to invest in rail electrification. As a result, the Virgin Media centre has closed, and 470 jobs have moved to Manchester because of HS2. When will we have a debate particularly on investment in areas that have convergence funding and that stand to lose that money because of Brexit, at a time when we need vital investment in, for instance, rail and the tidal lagoon?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has raised a series of very significant issues. I encourage him to raise them directly during Transport questions on 24 May.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. As colleagues will know, there is a statement to follow. I have no idea how well subscribed it will be, but it is on an important matter. Moreover, the first, in particular, of the two Backbench Business debates is very well subscribed. I would like to accommodate remaining colleagues, but I should be very grateful if they felt able to be especially pithy today.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I recently visited the charity Carers' Resource in Bradford. That charity, along with the 7 million unpaid carers for both the young and old across the UK, have been waiting since 2016 for the Government to publish a national carers strategy and action plan. Can the Leader of the House tell us when that report will be published, and will she grant Government time for us to discuss these important issues on the Floor of the House?

Andrea Leadsom: Let me first join the hon. Lady in thanking all the carers up and down the country who do so much in our communities. If she would like to write to me, I will see whether I can obtain further information on where the report is.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): In my constituency last year, mum of three Hamida Sidat had her life brutally taken away from her when she was hit by an unlicensed, uninsured driver who left the scene of the accident. He was later sentenced to two years in jail. May we have a debate on when the Government will introduce the Bill to increase the sentences given to those who are found guilty of causing death by dangerous driving, which they promised to introduce in October 2017?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady has raised a harrowing case and I am very sorry to hear about it. The Attorney General is sitting on the Front Bench and has heard what she has said. I will certainly ask him for a further update.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): May we have an oral statement from the Cabinet Office on why the devolution guidance notes relating to Wales, and Wales alone, in respect of withdrawal from the European Union have been changed and no longer presume that legislative consent is required for changes in devolved competence? That fundamentally undermines the Welsh constitution, which has been endorsed in two separate referendums.

Andrea Leadsom: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the Government are absolutely committed to working closely with each of the devolved Administrations on all issues relating to Brexit legislation, and we will continue to do so.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I am feeling extremely frustrated. There were two shootings in my constituency this weekend. What are the Government doing about this? They say they have published a serious violence strategy, yet time and again we have asked questions here about when we will be able to debate that strategy. So my question is very simple: when will we have that promised debate here?

Andrea Leadsom: First, I thank the hon. Lady for all the work she does. She has raised this issue a number of times. I am looking to provide a slot. There are many competing priorities for time in this Chamber, as she will appreciate, but I am aware of the appalling violence that took place over the weekend, some of it in her constituency. The UK has some of the toughest gun laws in the world and we are determined to keep it that way. We have already consulted on new laws on offensive and dangerous weapons and we will bring forward further measures as soon as we are able to do so.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Community transport is vital to many of my older and disabled constituents, but proposed changes by the Department for Transport risk imposing huge costs on local providers, including Wandsworth Community Transport. May we have a debate in Government time to discuss this important issue and the potential impact and loss of transport services for older and disabled people?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an important issue and I can absolutely agree. My constituency also has issues involving the loss of community transport. It is a very important matter. I encourage her to raise it directly at Transport oral questions on 24 May.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Eight weeks today, we will be marking the 70th anniversary of the NHS. How will the House be marking that and will the Leader of the House make sure that there is significant Government time to debate the serious challenges now facing the NHS?

Andrea Leadsom: I know that we will all want to celebrate the amazing achievements of the NHS. A lot of consideration is being given now to exactly how we can celebrate it. The hon. Lady may be aware that there will be a debate next Wednesday, 16 May, on the 70th anniversary of the NHS and public health, which she might want to attend. I am delighted that the Government have provided over £14 billion more to spend on caring for people than in 2010 and that there are almost 42,500 more clinical staff looking after patients than in 2010.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Leader of the House may be aware that in many of our businesses and shopping centres across the UK there is a distinct lack of changing places such as slightly larger disabled toilets with facilities mainly for adults and children in wheelchairs. Will she find time for a debate in Government time on this important subject and try to encourage businesses to invest in their services to ensure people have these much needed changing areas?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman raising this point. I agree that it is vital that there are places for people to change, whether they have babies or are people with disabilities. I encourage him to raise the matter in an Adjournment debate so he can take it up directly with Ministers.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The other week, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) led a very successful debate in Westminster Hall on the work of the Council of Europe, in which the

right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) called for an annual debate in this Chamber on that topic in Government time. That was unanimously supported, so will the Leader of the House look at this proposal seriously and report back to tell us her view?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an important point. It has been suggested that the Council of Europe may become increasingly important and relevant as we seek to leave the European Union. I am always happy to hear suggestions from the House and to consider them seriously.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): A constituent of mine has now twice been refused a visitor visa for her mother, once after her infant child died in 2016 from the rare genetic condition GM1 gangliosidosis, and recently again when she applied for her mother to come and visit her son, who, sadly, has the same genetic progressive disorder. May we have a debate in Government time about compassion in the Home Office because it is sorely needed?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that the Home Office is looking carefully at ensuring the right level of sympathy and empathy in particular cases. She raises an important constituency case that I suggest she take up directly with Home Office Ministers, or if she writes to me, I can take it up with them on her behalf.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Two weeks ago, I asked the Leader of the House for a statement on whether the long-overdue NHS pay award for staff would be fully funded, and she advised me to bring it up in Health questions. I tried to do that on Tuesday but unfortunately was not chosen. Can she advise me on how I might obtain either a statement or a debate on whether the pay award will be fully funded?

Andrea Leadsom: I suggest that the hon. Lady table a parliamentary written question, which would get her the answer she seeks, but I think we can all celebrate the fact that more than 1 million NHS workers will benefit from the new pay deal. In particular, the lowest starting salary in the NHS will increase from £15,404 to £18,000 in 2020-21.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): This week, the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and the Welsh Affairs Committee held a joint hearing on the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. In Swansea and Gower, we are absolutely desperate for some good news, following the tragic job losses this week. Please can we have some good news for south Wales, and please will the Leader of the House find time to discuss the urgency of a decision on the tidal lagoon?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to the hon. Lady's request. As she will know, there has been a lengthy discussion, particularly about the Swansea bay tidal lagoon, on the grounds that it is a very expensive and complex project. Nevertheless, I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can take up directly with a Minister what the progress is on that important project.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Scottish Gas Networks installed a gas meter in my constituent's property, and it did it such that the on-off metal lever was cutting into an electric cable, which is an obvious danger. It has been rectified, but he feels that Gas Safe, the body that holds gas registrations, has not investigated properly. I have asked an inspector to get in touch with my office, but he has ignored me. I wrote to the chief executive at the end of March but have not even had an acknowledgement. Can we have a statement on how I can hold this body to account and how my constituent can get answers about this dangerous installation?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the matter in this place, and perhaps that in itself will spark a reply. He could also write to BEIS Ministers and ask them to look into it on his behalf.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): A few weeks ago, I and over 50 colleagues from across the House wrote to the Foreign Secretary about the Polish holocaust law. I have not had a response, but I have since learnt that the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum has had thousands of hate-filled emails and communications and holocaust denials. The law was passed by the Law and Justice party, a sister party of the Conservative party. May we have an urgent debate in this place about the Polish holocaust law?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly share the hon. Gentleman's concern. If he writes to me with details of his letter, I can ask the Foreign Office to reply to him urgently.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): My constituents Mr and Mrs Owen are law-abiding citizens with a strong interest in animal welfare, and as such have reported illegal hunting activities to Cheshire police several times, but one day they found themselves visited by officers from the counter-terrorism unit. We have never had a straight answer about how they ended up coming to the unit's attention. Can we have a debate please on greater transparency within the police?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a concerning issue. I encourage him to write to Ministers to get a proper answer.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Some 50% of people diagnosed with Parkinson's will go on to suffer from depression, anxiety and hallucinations. Yesterday, the all-party group on Parkinson's, which I chair along with Baroness Gale, and Parkinson's UK published a report, "Mental health matters too". One fifth of people with Parkinson's will not gain access to mental health services. Can we have a statement from the Government on how they intend to ensure that people with Parkinson's have an equal right to mental health support?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important point. There is an increasing awareness that many long-term conditions have mental health problems associated with them. The Government are committed to achieving greater parity of esteem between physical and mental health and are putting significant new funding into expanding mental health services. I encourage her to seek a further debate so that she can raise this particular issue directly with Ministers.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Last night, Basford United completed an unforgettable league and cup double and secured yet another promotion. This is a well-run football club that makes a real impact on the pitch, but also off the pitch by sharing its facilities with the rest of our community. May we have a debate in Government time on the impact of non-league football?

Andrea Leadsom: May I first congratulate the hon. Gentleman's team? I also pay tribute to its desire to share its facilities with the community. That is incredibly important. I am sure that there would be plenty of support for a Backbench business debate on the contribution of football teams such as his, if he were to seek one.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for disability, I should particularly like to thank you, Mr Speaker, for all your work on disability inclusion, which has been invaluable. May we have a debate on the inadequacy of personal independence payment and employment and support allowance assessments for individuals with brain injury? Research by Headway has found that 76% of respondents said that it was difficult to explain the effects of brain injury due to the nature of the forms, and 71% felt that the assessors did not understand their brain injury. We are failing a very vulnerable group.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an important issue. The matter of brain injury is raised quite frequently in this Chamber, and I know that a good meeting took place yesterday with the Brain Injury Association. She will be aware that we have Department for Work and Pensions oral questions on 21 May. I urge her to raise this matter directly with Ministers then.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): May we have a debate on the impact of rail franchising on passengers? The service provided by Northern Rail through my constituency has been appalling for months and hit new lows this week. I think my constituents would very much appreciate a full debate on this matter.

Andrea Leadsom: I am genuinely sorry to hear that. The hon. Lady might like to seek an Adjournment debate to talk about her particular constituency experiences. I can say to her, however, that we are making a huge investment in the railways, with around £48 billion to be spent between 2019 and 2024. We want to make that funding count and ensure that we take advantage of the best technologies, with the specific desire to give passengers a better journey experience as a result.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I should like to thank you, Mr Speaker, and your colleagues for your attendance at our predecessor Michael Martin's requiem mass in Glasgow yesterday. I am sure you will remember how poignant Michael's effort was to promote social housing construction in Glasgow over many years, and I was delighted to learn last night that one of the housing associations that he was closely involved with, Hawthorn Housing Co-operative, had been awarded a platinum Investors in People award as well as a gold Investors in Young People award. That is a great testament to his legacy of promoting social

[Mr Paul Sweeney]

housing in Glasgow. However, social housing problems are as critical and acute as they ever were, in the city of Glasgow and all around the UK, so please will the Leader of the House arrange a debate in Government time on the critical issue of providing more social housing for the people of this country?

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Gentleman in again paying tribute to the ex-Speaker, Michael Martin, and I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on your effort to go there and be part of his funeral. I am sure that that was appreciated by his family and friends. I also congratulate the hon. Gentleman's constituency business on receiving those fantastic awards and on all it is doing for social housing. I can tell him that it is the Prime Minister's personal priority to address all areas of our housing shortage across the United Kingdom. In terms of affordable and social housing, a further £2 billion is now going into affordable homes, which brings the Government's commitment to social, council and low-cost homes up to more than £9 billion, which we believe will make a significant difference.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Please may we have a debate on what more the Government can do to support our steel industry, not least because this week Tata announced plans to sell part of its UK business, including Cogent in my constituency? We need a sector deal for steel.

Andrea Leadsom: This is an important industry for the United Kingdom, and I know that all right hon. and hon. Members want to ensure that we continue to have a thriving steel sector. The hon. Lady has spoken about this a number of times, and she is right to do so. I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can talk directly to Ministers about what more can be done to defend the sector.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on Virgin Media's decision to close its flagship site in my constituency? There are currently 772 jobs at risk, but Virgin Media's management are being obstructive by denying Assembly Members and Members of Parliament access to the staff.

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sorry to hear about that, and the hon. Lady is right to raise the matter in the House. I encourage her to seek an early Adjournment debate so that she can take the matter up directly with Ministers.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Tomorrow evening, Cardiff Blues will play in the final of the European challenge cup. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing them luck and in congratulating Cardiff City on winning promotion to the premier league and Cardiff Devils on winning the ice hockey elite league? May we have a debate on the great sporting successes of Cardiff?

Andrea Leadsom: May I offer huge congratulations to Cardiff and to the hon. Lady on raising its successes? I am absolutely sure that her constituents will be delighted to hear their achievements being proclaimed in this place.

Mr Speaker: Last but never forgotten: Gloria De Piero.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Antisocial behaviour is a big issue in my constituency. The vandalism, nuisance neighbours and repeated aggressive behaviour are often described as low level but they can make life a living hell for the victims. May we have a debate on whether the existing tools are tough enough?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is exactly right. Antisocial behaviour is a real blight on people's lives and I am sure that we have all had constituency cases involving people who simply cannot cope with these levels of antisocial behaviour. A lot has been done to give the police more powers to tackle this, but I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate or perhaps a Backbench business debate, so that all Members can share their views with Ministers.

Sir Christopher Chope: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This arises directly from business questions, during which we made reference to the Delegated Legislation Committee that is due to sit on Monday afternoon to discuss the abolition of Christchurch Borough Council. Because this hybrid instrument affects Christchurch exclusively, I applied to serve on the Committee that will consider it—I made my application to the Selection Committee. I hoped that I would then be able to raise in Committee the criticism that has been made from the House of Lords Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee, as well as issues relating to the instrument being a retrospective measure, which, as I said, is the subject of potential legal proceedings. What can be done to reverse the Selection Committee's decision that I should not be allowed to be a full member of the Delegated Legislation Committee? It is surely right that minority interests, particularly when one constituency is uniquely affected, should be able to be fully represented on a Committee. Obviously, I can attend the Committee, but I cannot participate fully in it. Is there any remedy available through which I can try to get myself on to that Committee?

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) for his point of order, and I will respond to it when I have heard the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh).

Sir Edward Leigh: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. In support of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch, may I say that no one in this House has worked harder on the issue than he has? He is the local Member, and he has fought almost a one-man campaign. It defies logic and belief that he is the one person who should be excluded from the Committee. He has a right to be heard.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Christchurch and to his hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough, who has just spoken in his support. My response is as follows. There is nothing whatsoever to prevent the hon. Member for Christchurch from attending the Committee. Moreover, if he wishes to speak in the proceedings of the Committee, he will be eligible to do so, and I am sure that, under any fair-minded Chair, he will have the opportunity to do that. I accept that the non-appointment of the hon. Gentleman to the Committee

is an important detriment so far as he is concerned, but it simply means that although he can attend and speak, he cannot vote if he is not a member of the Committee.

Secondly, no obvious means occur to me whereby the decision can be reversed. There is no procedural opportunity via the Chair, for example, or initiated by anyone other than the Government via the Chamber. Some people might think—I think this is the gravamen of the point raised by the hon. Member for Gainsborough—that it is perhaps less than collegiate, kind or courteous on the part of the powers that be knowingly and deliberately to exclude the hon. Member for Christchurch from the Committee. Unfortunately, in matters of this kind, the Chair has no responsibility for collegiality, courtesy or kindness. The Leader of the House, however, is an extremely senior figure in our political system. As she has pointed out, she is well aware that she is not just the Government's representative in the House, but the House's representative in the Government. She may feel that she does have such a role, and she may or may not wish to be sensitive to the concerns that her hon. Friends have raised, but that has to be a matter for her. I might suggest that perhaps she and the hon. Gentleman have a cup of tea together. I have known the hon. Gentleman for over 30 years, and he is a formidable parliamentarian. Certainly, he should be treated accordingly.

Belhaj and Boudchar: Litigation Update

12.21 pm

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement. In 2012, Mr Abdul Hakim Belhaj and his wife, Mrs Fatima Boudchar, brought a claim against the United Kingdom Government and two individuals: the right hon. Jack Straw, the former Foreign Secretary; and Sir Mark Allen, a former director at the Foreign Office. The claimants alleged that the UK Government were complicit in their abduction, detention and rendition to Libya in 2004, and in the treatment they suffered at the hands of others. Mrs Boudchar was pregnant at the time.

The claimants' case, in outline, is that in early 2004, they were detained and forcibly conveyed through a number of jurisdictions by others, ultimately to be handed over to the Libyan regime of which Mr Belhaj was an opponent. During this period, they were subjected to a harrowing ordeal that caused them significant distress. Mrs Boudchar was released from detention in Libya in June 2004 and gave birth shortly afterwards. Mr Belhaj was not released until March 2010.

The claims against Jack Straw and Sir Mark Allen were withdrawn on 3 May 2018. Today, I can announce to the House that, following mediation, the UK Government have reached a full and final settlement of Mr Belhaj's and Mrs Boudchar's claims. I pay tribute to the constructive way in which Mr Belhaj and Mrs Boudchar have approached the mediation. This has been a long-running and hugely complex piece of litigation that has been difficult for all individuals involved as parties.

As we have seen in recent years, there remains a considerable international threat to the UK and our allies. It is important that the Government, and the security and intelligence agencies, are able to respond properly to keep our country safe, but it is also important that we should act in line with our values and in accordance with the rule of law. That means that when we get things wrong, it is right and just that we acknowledge it, compensate those affected and learn lessons. I believe this is such a case.

The settlement of this claim has been agreed out of court. The main elements of the agreement I can report to the House are as follows. First, no admissions of liability have been made by any of the defendants in settling these claims. Secondly, the claimants have now withdrawn their claims against all the defendants. Thirdly, the Government have agreed to pay Mrs Boudchar £500,000; Mr Belhaj did not seek and has not been given any compensation. Finally, I have met Mr Belhaj and Mrs Boudchar—indeed, Mrs Boudchar is present in the Gallery to hear this statement—and the Prime Minister has now written to them both to apologise.

I think it right that I should set out to the House the terms of that apology in full:

“The Attorney General and senior UK Government officials have heard directly from you both about your detention, rendition and the harrowing experiences you suffered. Your accounts were moving and what happened to you is deeply troubling. It is clear that you were both subjected to appalling treatment and that you suffered greatly, not least the affront to the dignity of Mrs Boudchar, who was pregnant at the time. The UK Government believes your accounts. Neither of you should have been treated in this way.

[The Attorney General]

The UK Government's actions contributed to your detention, rendition and suffering. The UK Government shared information about you with its international partners. We should have done more to reduce the risk that you would be mistreated. We accept this was a failing on our part.

Later, during your detention in Libya, we sought information about and from you. We wrongly missed opportunities to alleviate your plight: this should not have happened.

On behalf of Her Majesty's Government, I apologise unreservedly. We are profoundly sorry for the ordeal that you both suffered and our role in it.

The UK Government has learned many lessons from this period. We should have understood much sooner the unacceptable practices of some of our international partners. And we sincerely regret our failures."

I hope that the Government's acknowledgment of these events in those unequivocal terms, and the apology they have each been given, will be of some comfort to Mr Belhaj and Mrs Boudchar. As the Prime Minister observed in her letter to them both, the Government have learned lessons from this period.

These events took place in the period after the 11 September 2001 attacks. It was a period in which we and our international partners were suddenly adapting to a completely new type and scale of threat. It is clear, with the benefit of hindsight, that the Government, the agencies and their staff were, in some respects, not prepared for the extreme demands suddenly placed on them. The unacceptable practices of some of our international partners should have been understood much sooner.

The Government have enacted reforms to ensure that the problems of the past will not be repeated. We have made it clear that Ministers must be consulted whenever UK personnel involved in a planned operation believe that a detainee is at serious risk of mistreatment by a foreign state. We have also improved Parliament's ability to oversee the actions of the agencies through the Justice and Security Act 2013.

The Intelligence and Security Committee is a Committee of Parliament and is fully independent of the Government. It has a statutory right to review past intelligence operations, and the Committee and its staff have direct access to agency papers. These reforms mean that the framework within which the UK now operates is very different from that in the early 2000s.

I end by reiterating that vital work is done to keep us safe and that we aspire to the highest ethical standards. When those standards are not met, it is right that we apologise, that we compensate those who have suffered as a result and that we make whatever changes we can to avoid the same thing happening again. That is the approach we have now taken in this case and, as such, I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Attorney General for that statement, which very properly will have been heard by Mrs Boudchar and a great many others.

12.29 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to the Attorney General for the statement and for advance sight of it.

Mrs Boudchar is indeed in the Public Gallery, and I am sure the whole House will sympathise with her and with Mr Belhaj. They suffered appalling treatment at the hands of others. What happened to them both is deeply disturbing, and I can only hope that the settlement of the legal case allows some closure on a terrible set of events.

The Prime Minister has written to Mr Belhaj and Mrs Boudchar to apologise for the appalling treatment they suffered. She was entirely right to do so and to accept, unequivocally and unreservedly, the failings on the part of the UK Government at that time. I, of course, agree with the Attorney General that our security and intelligence services carry out great work in helping to make us all safe, but the rule of law must always be respected and must always guide the Government's actions. Our security and intelligence services must be properly overseen. When things do go wrong, it is right to acknowledge that in very clear terms, to do what can be done to make recompense and to learn lessons going forward. The Attorney General's statement rightly raised problems regarding information sharing, the need for more actions to reduce the risk of mistreatment and missed opportunities to alleviate suffering. We can and must do all that we can to stop this happening again.

The relationship between our intelligence and security services and the Government is now subject to a different framework, which is a welcome step forward. The statutory rights of the Intelligence and Security Committee, independent of the Government, to review past intelligence operations and to have direct access to agency papers are important. It is crucial that Ministers will be consulted whenever UK personnel are involved in a planned operation and believe that a detainee is at serious risk of mistreatment by another state. I appreciate that the Attorney General is, understandably, limited in what he can say openly, but I would ask for an assurance that such consultation with Ministers will be detailed, considered and informed by as much information as can be reasonably made available to them at the time.

Will the Attorney General assure me that we will always be vigilant in ensuring that the framework within which our intelligence and security services operate is robust and always shaped by our values of the rule of law, liberty and human rights? After all, it is only by behaving according to those standards ourselves that we can stand up for those values all around the world.

The Attorney General: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks and for the tone of them. He is right to say that one thing we should seek to achieve, not least for Mr Belhaj and Mrs Boudchar, is the ability for them to have closure and to move on with their lives. He is also right to say that the framework in place for the future must be properly robust and ensure that this kind of thing does not happen again. He asked me about consultation with Ministers on questions of this nature. I am sure he will be aware of the consolidated guidance published by the coalition Government in 2010, which of course we keep under review. It indicates clearly that when it comes to the treatment of detainees and information obtained from them, there are clear expectations of the intelligence agencies; where necessary, they should refer matters to Ministers; and when they do so Ministers should be properly informed of the background to the decisions they are being asked to take.

The hon. Gentleman is, of course, also right to say that the framework that surrounds all these activities must be fundamentally based on our values, one of which is the capacity of this Government or any Government to accept where mistakes have been made and apologise for them.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): As chairman of the all-party group on extraordinary rendition, may I unreservedly welcome this statement and the tone of it, and congratulate the Prime Minister and the Attorney General on producing it? My main regret is that it has taken so many years to produce it. These events took place in 2004, and as long ago as 2013 Mr Belhaj offered to settle this case for £3 compensation and an apology—that was rejected. The whole thing has now reached a much better resolution, and my right hon. and learned Friend has expressed all the sentiments we all feel about proper standards in the service. Does he accept that we now need to move quickly to the most important thing, which is to be reassured that nothing of this kind is likely to happen again and that our intelligence services will not get embroiled in such serious breaches of human rights?

The Intelligence and Security Committee is shortly to produce a report that covers these matters. Will my right hon. and learned Friend therefore assure me that it will be followed by a ministerial statement that will set out as clearly as is possible, given the security problems, the facts that the Government are now prepared to disclose as to how this happened and, more importantly, how future rules and the consolidated guidance are to be so revised that we can be reassured that for the foreseeable future it is highly unlikely that the British will ever be involved in such an embarrassing situation?

The Attorney General: I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for that, and I share his regret that it has taken this long to resolve the matter. He may know that in recent months—and it has been recent months—the Prime Minister has asked me to look in particular at this case and to lead the mediation process that recently concluded. What needed to be done here was apparent to me very quickly following my involvement in the case: there needed to be a resolution of this matter and an apology. Although, as he knows, this is an immensely complex matter, legally, factually and in many other ways, it is extremely welcome that we have been able to resolve matters as we have.

In so far as reassurance for the future is concerned, my right hon. and learned Friend has heard me say something about, and of course he knows about, the changes that have been made, since the incidents I have described, to the systems that we apply here. He knows from his experience in government—I have certainly found this in mine—that the way in which decisions of this nature are taken is now fundamentally different from the way in which they previously were, and that provides us with some reassurance. He also mentions the ISC report, which we await. I hope he will be reassured to know that, as far as I know, the Committee has been provided with the information that it has asked for in relation to this case—I know the Committee will ask again if there is more that it requires. When it has produced its report, the Government will of course seek to respond in a meaningful way to it.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Attorney General for the tone of his statement and for generously giving me advance sight of it. His statement acknowledges that a previous UK Government were complicit in the abduction, detention and rendition to Gaddafi's Libya of a man who was an opponent of that vile regime. That is particularly shocking to us when we remember that the blood of so many innocent civilians, including British civilians, was on Gaddafi's hands. The extraordinary rendition of Mrs Boudchar makes this even worse, particularly as she was pregnant at the time. I pay tribute to her fortitude in pressing this claim and in being here today.

The UK Government's complicity in these events is shameful and is a gross breach of international humanitarian law, human rights and the rule of law. I am pleased that the Attorney General has acknowledged that lessons must be learned and sought to give us some reassurance for the future. May I ask him three questions? Will he specifically assure the House that such an occurrence could not take place again under a UK Government? Will he assure this House that in future information will not be shared with so-called international partners who flout international law and human rights? Can he tell us whether the investigations that have gone into settling this claim have uncovered whether what happened was part of the dark side of Tony Blair's deal in the desert with Gaddafi in 2004?

The Attorney General: May I start at the end, but first express my gratitude to the hon. and learned Lady again for her remarks and the tone of them? She will understand that I cannot comment in detail about the position on the behaviour of the former Prime Minister and his Government. I am sure she will expect that Tony Blair has been told about the outcome of this process, and that is the case, but I cannot comment further on what happened during the course of his Government.

The other two questions the hon. and learned Lady asks are about the future, and she raises concerns that the whole House will have about how certain we can be that this will never happen again. The best that I can do is to restate the points that I have made about the changes that have occurred. She will be conscious of the substantial difference that the changes that I have described have made, not just to the processes that the Government apply in such cases but to the approach that they take to them. Formality needed to be brought back into these processes, and it is now there. The hon. and learned Lady will know that as Attorney General I am now a full member of the National Security Council; for me, that is a clear indication of the seriousness with which the Government take the questions of legality and the rule of law that must of course be at the heart of these judgments.

On the broader picture, the hon. and learned Lady will recognise that it is vital that the British Government and their agencies are able to recover intelligence that enables us to keep the British people safe, and it is difficult to give the absolute assurances that she seeks. The best that any Government can do is put in place the processes and practices that mean that the right values are applied to the judgments that we have to take, including in what are very difficult cases. I hope I have been clear that on this occasion we did not get those judgments right. We must do better in future.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend has done exactly the right thing today and has cleared up a disgraceful incident, which was of course not of this Government's making. He has also underlined the debt that we owe to the men and women of the security and intelligence services, who almost always conduct themselves with complete propriety and effectiveness. The lesson from all this is surely that the officials who help us to stay safe and who defend our country in the shadows must never play fast and loose with human rights and international humanitarian law, which are the rocks on which the safety of us all depends.

Will my right hon. and learned Friend ensure that he sends to his opposite number in Washington the relevant details of this issue in respect of Gina Haspel, whose hearing for the role of CIA director is currently taking place? She was involved in the management of the black site in Thailand at which Fatima Boudchar was held and so grievously mistreated.

The Attorney General: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's opening comments. I am sure he will understand that I do not wish to be involved in the processes of the appointment of the new director of the CIA. Nevertheless, he asks perfectly reasonably that there is contact with our international partners about this case and that where we can we give information about it and about the way in which we have chosen to deal with it. Of course, we must also give the clearest possible signal to all our allies and those with whom we deal about what our standards are, what we expect and what we will not accept.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I congratulate the Attorney General on the statement and the sensitive way in which he put the argument.

First, I was a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee for 11 years, and in the period leading up to the 2010 election the Committee did a substantial amount of work on what consolidated guidance should look like. In the event, the coalition Government issued a completely different set of consolidated guidance. Will the Attorney General undertake to look at the work that was done by the Committee to see whether any additions can be taken from it?

Secondly, I am aware that, as has already been conceded, there were failures of record keeping and failures on the part of the agencies in respect of the way ministerial authorisations were sought at that time and in those sets of circumstances. I am aware that there have been improvements since then, but will the Attorney General undertake to keep both of those things under review? They are important and I suspect that they played a part in this particular case.

The Attorney General: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. On his first point, he is right that consolidated guidance should be kept under review. As I indicated to the shadow Solicitor General, the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), we will certainly seek to do that. The hon. Gentleman will know that the current ISC inquiry on detainees will, we hope, feed into a proper look again at whether the consolidated guidance is in the right place. It is worth making the point, which the hon. Gentleman will

recognise from his experience of these matters, that the UK is unusual in the publication of such guidance. It is of course important that we recognise our failures on a day like this, but it is also important that we recognise where we lead the world, and there are some aspects in which we do. It is important not just that this information is available to those who participate in the work of the intelligence agencies, but that the public can see it and that the kind of debates we are having can be held in public.

On the hon. Gentleman's second point, he will understand that Jack Straw, who was Foreign Secretary at that time, was an individual defendant in this case. I have made it clear that the claim against him has been dropped and there is no further pursuit of those allegations. I understand that Jack Straw will make his own statement later today. The points I have made are about the system more broadly, as are the points made by the hon. Gentleman. In relation to the system more broadly, it is important that we make what changes we can to ensure that we have the safeguards that we need to get as close as we can to a position in which we can answer the questions that the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) asked earlier, in the most absolute terms that we can give.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I very much welcome the statement and congratulate the Attorney General on it and on the way he has handled this difficult and sensitive matter. It is right that the Prime Minister has responded promptly in the terms in which she has.

Will the Attorney General confirm not only that we are resolute in the maintenance of our adherence to all international and domestic legal standards and rules in this matter, but that in any revision of the consolidated guidance and any other procedures going forward, the involvement in a full sense of the Law Officers, and the full and complete documentation of all advice from the Law Officers to other members of the Government and to any operational agencies, will remain a central feature of the decision-making process?

The Attorney General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind words. I can give him that reassurance. I indicated one element in which that reassurance manifests itself—full membership of the National Security Council for the Attorney General, which is a significant change—but there are others. I hope that I speak for my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor General in saying that we believe that our participation in these decisions is where it should be. We have the opportunity to get our points across and will make sure that that continues to be the case.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I thank the Attorney General for advance sight of the statement and commend him for what he described as his role in bringing this case to a conclusion, although it really should have come to a conclusion some years ago.

Before we rush to congratulate ourselves on getting to this point, we must not lose sight of the fact that this case and the al-Saadi case came to light only because somebody happened to find papers in Gaddafi's palace in the days following the collapse of his regime. Surely,

justice should never rely on events as arbitrary and random as that. If we are now to restore confidence in the proper working of our intelligence services, will the Attorney General carry out the public consultation on the consolidated guidance that the intelligence services commissioner has recommended?

The Attorney General: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. He has taken a considerable interest in this case and I pay tribute to him for his continued attention to it.

On the right hon. Gentleman's second point, as I mentioned, the consolidated guidance is a public document, which of course permits the public to comment on it. In my view, that is as it should be. As he has heard me say, we will continue to look at whether the guidance is in the right place. I believe that we will be particularly spurred into that by the upcoming ISC report. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman and other members of the public will have the opportunity to make their views known.

On the right hon. Gentleman's first point, I think he and I are entirely in agreement that prevention is better than cure. It has been difficult to cure this case. I hope I have made it clear that we have done our best to resolve the case in a satisfactory fashion, but that is extremely difficult to do. It is far better to avoid such incidents occurring in the first place. It is about a system change and a culture change that brings that about, and I believe that in recent years—not least, may I say, under the coalition Government of which the right hon. Gentleman was a distinguished member—we have seen those changes.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I thank the Attorney General for his statement today. I worked on this case in my previous role as a Government lawyer, as of course have many Government lawyers over the years, and even though there are clearly no winners today, I ask him to join me in praising the work of lawyers in the Treasury Solicitor's Department and the Security Service lawyers who themselves provide a barrier, where one is needed, in the difficult balancing act between the rule of law and protecting national security. However, I ask him to tell us what lessons have been learned with regard to our ability to speed up litigation, because this matter has gone on for far too long. I thank him for getting personally involved in the mediation and for going to carry out that mediation himself.

The Attorney General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. She is right that a huge amount of work has been put into this case by lawyers on all sides, and very few people register that fact when the case is concluded, however it comes to be concluded. As a fellow lawyer, she will agree with me that it is always better to resolve cases outside the courtroom if one can. It seemed to me that there was a clear imperative in this case to do exactly that. It was, in my view, in nobody's interest for this case to continue through the courts and to drag out the difficulties that it had caused to all concerned. I am delighted to see that it has been resolved. That, of course, has been a team effort, and I hope very much that this will enable us to draw a line under this incident, recognising as I do that there are lessons to be learned for the future.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): This has been a shameful episode. The Attorney General is right to express his sympathy and thanks to Mr Belhaj and Mrs Boudchar. He should perhaps extend his sympathies to other victims of rendition such as the al-Saadi family, and his thanks to those who have represented them, such as the Reprieve organisation and Leigh Day solicitors, often in the face of great hostility from some politicians and sections of the press. This case has also shone a light on the Justice and Security Act 2013. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) took that Act through the Commons. I led the Opposition in Committee, and we expressed grave concerns about the ambit of that Act and the extension of closed material procedures. The Belhaj case over the past five years has justified those criticisms. Is this not the time to review that Act and the extent of closed material procedures, particularly if they look like they will encroach on criminal as well as civil proceedings?

The Attorney General: The hon. Gentleman heard me say that the process of resolving this case has taken considerable effort by not just the claimants themselves and others in the Government, but lawyers on both sides, and I am happy to repeat that. In relation to closed material proceedings, I am not sure that I would go as far as he does; I do not believe that this case demonstrates the lesson that he draws from it. I hope he will forgive me if I do not return to the arguments of 2013 around the Bill, not least because I wish to preserve the sanity of my right hon. and learned Friend, the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Minister says that he should not criticise the Blair Government, but we can. Has any apology been given this morning from Mr Blair for rendering an opponent of a murderous regime into the hands of that regime? I doubt whether any apology has been given, any more than an apology has been given over Iraq. Further to that, the British Government have, quite rightly, given an apology. The British taxpayer is now paying considerable amounts of compensation, and quite rightly, too. One might ask: what compensation has this murderous former Libyan Government given to the poor people who died in the Lockerbie incident?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend will be aware that the House is discussing just that matter later this afternoon. He will also know that the Government have not diminished their efforts to secure proper compensation in those cases. He knows—he has done it with me—that we have spent a good deal of time over the previous decade or so criticising the Blair Government, but my purpose today is to resolve the individual case that I have reported to the House. It seems to me a principle worth defending that the Government as an institution should take responsibility for what has happened here. In relation to the behaviour of individuals who were Ministers at the time or indeed civil servants, it is a principle worth defending that the Government continue to take responsibility for their actions. That is the best way to resolve cases of this nature.

David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I welcome my right hon. and learned Friend's statement and apology today and congratulate both him and the

[David Evennett]

Prime Minister on bringing a dignified end to this long-running case. Will he reaffirm that it is crucial that we always strike the correct balance between counter-terrorism and security and acting in accordance with the rule of law and, of course, our British values?

The Attorney General: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. It is important that we continue to strike that balance, and where we get it wrong, we say so.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I am very grateful to the Attorney General for his dignified and direct statement. It is absolutely right in these very troubling circumstances that the Government do not seek to cavil or equivocate. On two occasions in his statement, he referred to the unacceptable practices of international partners. Can he say anything more about what can be done to ensure that those do not persist in the future, and that if they do, the British Government play no part in them?

The Attorney General: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He will recognise that some of the changes that have been made since this incident have, I hope, encouraged us to ask better questions and to ask them more persistently. I made reference to the consolidated guidance, of which he will know, and in relation to such documents, we make it very clear that intelligence operatives should ask questions, before information is handed over, about what will be done with that information and what may then happen. Therefore, we do need to see better questions asked more repeatedly, and that, I believe, is one of the changes that is occurring.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If there was a failure of the intelligence services under the Tony Blair Government then it is right that an apology should be made. However, my constituents in Kettering will be stunned by the scale of the compensation; half a million pounds is a sum to which they could never aspire. I would like to know how that sum was arrived at. I believe that I heard the Father of House correctly when he said that there was an earlier opportunity to settle this case without that scale of compensation. Can the Attorney General update the House on that?

The Attorney General: There certainly have been other efforts made to resolve this matter. They have not been successful for a variety of different reasons. The resolution

of the case on this occasion did, as I said in my statement, involve some compensation to Mrs Boudchar. I hope my hon. Friend will understand that many of the details of that settlement are confidential and I cannot discuss them in the House, but he has my assurance that, conscious as I am of the need to ensure that no further taxpayer money was spent that did not need to be spent, I would have needed to satisfy myself that compensation of this nature was appropriate. Again, I do not wish to go into the detail of what happened to Mrs Boudchar. She has said some of that herself, and it is in the public domain, but I am afraid that the necessity of compensating for what happened to her is, in my view, beyond doubt and is part of the appropriate approach that the Government now need to take.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I welcome today's statement and I trust that it will bring some closure to all those concerned. Will my right hon. and learned Friend indicate whether an assessment has been made, or will be made, of the impact that this settlement will have on intelligence sharing going forward?

The Attorney General: As I said earlier, the need to continue to share intelligence is vital. If we are to keep the British people safe from what are growing and more and more disparate threats, the flow of intelligence needs to continue, but none of that must be at the expense of the core values by which the United Kingdom lives. Therefore, we must strike the balance to which other Members have referred between continuing to deal with intelligence as my hon. Friend describes and making sure that our standards are maintained.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the tone of the Attorney General's statement. For me, the key lesson from this is that those who argue that the ends justify the means in relation to our national security are mistaken. What are the key lessons that the Attorney General and the Government have taken from this case?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend sums up one of those lessons well. It is important that, taking from what has happened here, we understand that system changes need to be made, and behavioural and cultural changes need to take place, some of which, in my view, are well under way. However, none of us should be complacent about them and we should all be vigilant to ensure that we continue to apply our values. My hon. Friend is right, too, that if we allow our values to erode, then so shall our influence around the world.

Mental Health: Failing a Generation

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE COMMITTEE AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

12.59 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you for allowing me to address the House on behalf of the Health and Social Care Committee and the Education Committee. I am addressing the Select Committees' report on the Government's Green Paper on transforming children and young people's mental health provision, which was published yesterday.

If I tell the House that the subtitle of our report is "failing a generation", hon. Members will get a sense of our shared disappointment at the scope and scale of the Government's Green Paper. We welcome the Green Paper but have serious concerns that it lacks ambition, as well as concerns about the very specific measures that it contains. It represents a huge missed opportunity. Every right hon. and hon. Member across the House will know that our mental health services are under enormous strain. There is growing demand that local services are often unable to meet. This is especially apparent when it comes to child and adolescent mental health services, or CAMHS. Our Committees reflect on the fact that half of all mental health conditions occur by the age of 14, and three quarters by the age of 24.

Around one in 10 children are living with some form of diagnosable mental health condition, but this figure stems from a prevalence study that was conducted back in 2004, and the results of a repeated study are not due until autumn this year. We heard from Jonathan Marron, the director general of community care at the Department of Health and Social Care, in an evidence session who said that this figure is not expected to go down. This represents hundreds of thousands of children and adolescents who will be affected by mental ill health, but for whom life should be filled with hope, opportunity and promise.

If ever there was a case for early intervention and, crucially, for preventive measures, it is children's mental health. The earlier we diagnose and treat a child's mental health condition when it appears, the better it is for the patient, their family and the NHS. If we leave it until there is a crisis, it is so much worse for those concerned, and costs the NHS and our country far more. So we might have hoped for a raft of preventive measures, tackling the root causes of mental ill health to keep our young people well. Instead, as we report, the Green Paper

"fails to consider how to prevent child and adolescent mental ill health in the first place."

This is a terrible omission, for if we can tackle the causes of mental ill health in children, we can prevent a lifetime of mental ill health in adults.

There is a significant evidence base for the importance of the first 1,001 days of a child's life in their development and wellbeing. The Green Paper itself indicated how early years brain development is a key factor for a child's future and their mental and physical health. We know that there are key factors that are more likely to

give rise to child mental health problems, such as parental mental health problems—especially perinatal mental health—and adverse childhood experiences. They were referenced in the Green Paper, but only in passing. If the Government really want to effect change, they need to adopt a preventive approach and do much more work to address the needs of key vulnerable groups at risk of adverse childhood experiences, and very young children as well.

What about the scale of the Green Paper? We report that it lacks ambition. The majority of children will not benefit from the Government's proposals to roll out "trailblazer" pilot schemes to tackle waiting time targets. These schemes will only affect between a fifth and a quarter of the country, and will not come into effect until 2022-23. That means that between three quarters and four fifths of children who need the extra support will simply not get it. We predict that hundreds of thousands of young people will be left without the proper care that they need, even if the Government's strategy is a success on its own terms. We express concerns that funding is not guaranteed post-2021 and is dependent on an unspecified level of success. This strategy strikes us as being utterly devoid of ambition, negligent of the true level of need and storing up trouble for the future.

Then there is the question of tackling health inequalities. We heard from many witnesses—in both oral and written evidence—about the correlation between social disadvantage and mental health. The Centre for Mental Health told us that

"the Green Paper makes little recognition of the wide inequalities in children's mental health. At age 11 children from the poorest 20% of households are four times more likely to have a serious mental health difficulty as those in the wealthiest 20%".

We asked how the Government's mental health strategy was integrated in the Government's other plans to contend with the issue of social mobility, but the Minister for School Standards told us that the two were not linked. Our Committees felt that this was a disappointing response and a massive missed opportunity.

We highlighted the need for services to be tailored for specific vulnerable groups—for example, looked-after children and children in care. The Green Paper's current proposals will not deliver the support needed for these groups and will miss out others entirely, including children in the criminal justice system, young people who are not in education or training, excluded children and young people who are in further education or undertaking apprenticeships.

Further disappointment was visited upon us when we investigated the degree to which the Green Paper embodied joined-up government. Mental health services for children and adolescents is the archetypal area of policy that needs co-ordination across a range of agencies and Departments—from schools to the criminal justice system, and from the NHS to our youth services and social care. We were very disappointed that there was no reference at all to social workers in the Green Paper. We got no sense whatever that this Green Paper intends to break down the barriers, explode the silos and provide person-centred services. Our report states that

"there must be effective coordination with other initiatives from across Government when building a new strategy."

[Luciana Berger]

Beyond these strategic concerns and issues, our Committees had a number of concerns about specific areas of the Green Paper, and I hope that the House will not mind if I outline some of these.

We looked at the factors affecting children's mental health, and the fierce system of high-stakes exams was highlighted both by the young people we heard from and educational professionals as a cause of mental ill health. We heard that very much while taking evidence. We reasserted the recommendation of our predecessor Committees that personal, social and health and economic education should be compulsory in all maintained and academy schools to educate young people about wellbeing and to give them a language to discuss their concerns and a space to build resilience.

We were especially concerned about the transition from child to adult mental health services at the age of 18, which was described to us as a "cliff edge". We recommend that the Government commit to a full assessment of the current transition arrangements between child and adult mental health services. Our Committees looked at the mental health workforce and heard how stretched it already is. We recommend that Health Education England sets out how it will address concerns about the impact of the Green Paper's proposals on the entire CAMHS workforce, including psychiatrist roles and community services, in its upcoming workforce strategy, which is due to be published in July.

We were concerned by the lack of detail about the training provided for designated senior leads for mental health in schools and the fact that the roles will be voluntary and unfunded. We recommend that the Government should set out an assessment of the feasibility of providing an additional responsibility payment for teachers who take on the designated senior lead role in schools. Further, we recommend that the Government develop contingency plans to ensure that the role could be delivered by qualified professionals. In those plans, they should also consider whether this should actually be the first course of action, rather than a contingency plan.

Overall, we were concerned that the health and education workforce may not have the capacity or capability to meet the extra demands of the proposals in the Green Paper. We recommend that the Government set out and publish plans to ensure that the existing workforce are not overburdened by the demands of the Green Paper. We were specifically concerned that the implementation of the four-week waiting time target for CAMHS referrals could have unintended consequences by making the threshold for accessing services even higher, and we recommend that adequate resource is made available to ensure that this does not happen.

We heard from witnesses that what is needed is a "seismic shift" in the approach to mental health for our young people. We need a system built around prevention, early intervention and personalisation. We need adequate resources and joined-up government to do everything possible to keep our children well and deliver a world-class service. On the evidence of the Green Paper, the Government's strategy will deliver no more than a minor tremor, not the seismic shift that we want to see. This is a missed opportunity.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for presenting the report on behalf of the two Committees, where it was a pleasure to join her as a member. Notwithstanding the concerns that have rightly been highlighted, I very much view the report as a piece of work to influence the Government's future policy making. Noting paragraph 36 on the damaging effects of social media on young people, what work does she think it might be necessary to undertake on this in future?

Luciana Berger: That was indeed a key part of our report. We had a mixed bag of evidence on social media. We heard from young people and from representatives of the Children's and Young People's Mental Health Coalition about this very specific issue. They told us about the opportunities for social media to provide peer support for young people, but also about the many challenges within social media. We said in our recommendation that we look forward to the forthcoming report from the chief medical officer on the impact of technology on children's health. That will be very important for us to consider in future plans.

The Science and Technology Committee is also conducting an inquiry, and its report will be key. We look forward to the outcome of the work by the working group on social media and digital sector companies that is being conducted in a partnership between the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. All those pieces of work are incredibly important. As I said, we recommended that teaching on social media should be included in the compulsory PSHE curriculum that we want to be introduced in all schools. That will equip the next generation with the tools to contend with navigating the technological landscape.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I congratulate the two Committees on a very good piece of work, even though it makes very unhappy reading. My hon. Friend referred to the correlation between social disadvantage and mental health. Will she say a little more about how the Government's Green Paper links to other Government initiatives such as the social mobility agenda?

Luciana Berger: I touched on that point in my introductory remarks. A report on social mobility entitled "Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential" that was released by the Department for Education just 10 days after the release of the Green Paper on children's mental health contained just one passing reference to the Green Paper. We asked the Minister about this and were very disappointed that he saw no connection or correlation between the two strategies. Ultimately, from the evidence we heard, this is a massive social justice issue for young people from the most disadvantaged and vulnerable backgrounds. We hope that the two strategies will now be joined up, because that has not been done so far.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her statement and the two Committees on their report. These joint Committee reports are a really good idea. Paragraph 50 says:

"We recommend that the Government commit to a full assessment of the current transition arrangements between child and adult mental health services."

I particularly welcome that, because it seems to me and my constituents in Kettering that too many young people are falling through the gaps at 18 and not receiving the services they need as they enter adulthood.

Luciana Berger: That is a critical issue that was raised on a number of occasions. A cliff edge exists between the services that young people receive until 18 and what happens when they then try to access adult services. The services are very different. In one part of the country, where services go up to 25, this is working very successfully. That was a recommendation in “Future in mind”, a report published back in 2014. We were firmly of the opinion that the Government should actively address this situation and see it amended across the country.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her statement and the Committees on this excellent report, which I endorse. Does she agree—she touched on this issue—that the absence of a real focus on early years before children get to school, and the absence of any real, in-depth understanding of the impact of adverse experiences of trauma, abuse or neglect in early years, is a gaping hole? Does she agree that the Government need to go back to the drawing board to extend the scope of the Green Paper to really focus on this issue, to gain a better understanding of it?

Luciana Berger: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his important contribution. One of our key recommendations was that the Government should publish the evidence review alongside the response to the report. They limited the scope of the Green Paper too early by restricting the terms of that evidence review. In fact, we heard in evidence that evolved during our inquiry that under-fives are completely absent from the Government’s plans, yet that is a time in a child’s life that determines their life chances and life outcomes. Clearly, this is very much a gaping hole that needs to be addressed.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her introduction of this excellent report. Desperate parents in my constituency report waiting months, sometimes over a year, for their children to receive assessments or to see mental health professionals. Her comments on workforce issues are therefore particularly welcome. One issue is the very high level of staff sickness due to stress. What comments has she to offer the House on how the wellbeing of staff should be part of the Government’s strategy?

Luciana Berger: I thank my hon. Friend for her important contribution. The chapter on the workforce was a key part of the report. The wellbeing of both the mental health workforce and the workforce in our schools and education sector should be addressed adequately. That is not happening at the moment. We heard in evidence that the mental health workforce, particularly for children, has the greatest vacancy rates. No doubt that is one of the reasons there is such a high absence rate due to sickness. We hope that Health Education England will heed our recommendation on the need to address an area that is massively wanting.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Prenatal exposure to alcohol causes permanent brain damage and is one of the contributory factors in mental ill health among children—and indeed into adult life as well. In a recent

study, as many as 40% of women said that they may have drunk alcohol during pregnancy. May I, through my hon. Friend, urge the Government to carry out a prevalence study on exactly how many children are damaged in this way? There is also a need for much greater awareness. The chief medical officer’s advice is that those who are planning a pregnancy or are pregnant should not drink alcohol, but that advice is not widely known. May I, through my hon. Friend, urge the Government to make sure that far more is done to raise awareness of the damage done by this condition?

Luciana Berger: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. No doubt the Government were listening to the very important points he has made. We did not address this in our report, but clearly issues around perinatal mental health and support for expectant mums are very important, including in the area that he mentions.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): The report refers to the Government’s proposal for a four-week time limit for access to mental health services for children. My hon. Friend will know that access has been a huge issue. She talked about unintended consequences. What was the Committee’s view on what needs to be done to avoid those?

Luciana Berger: Officials in the Department of Health and Social Care told us that they expect that there will be some unintended consequences in seeking to achieve the four-week waiting time target if there are not adequate resources to make sure that the staff are in place to meet these young people’s needs. We know from the evidence we heard that right across the country there are already massive waiting times. In my own area, for example, 460 young people are waiting 24 weeks just for an assessment, let alone treatment. Unless we know that there will be more counsellors, psychiatrists and psychotherapists to support these young people, there is no way that the Government will be able to introduce a four-week waiting time standard without raising thresholds for young people to access those services. That is a key recommendation of our report that we want the Government to address.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, thank my hon. Friend for her statement and the work of the Committees in producing this really important report. Paragraph 81 goes to the heart of the matter:

“The Government should consider in its plans whether the role being delivered by qualified professionals rather than teachers should be its first course of action rather than the contingency plan.”

Does she agree that, owing to the scale, seriousness and severity of mental health challenges in young people, the Government should build a service based around school but available out of school and staffed by mental health professionals?

Luciana Berger: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. A key concern we heard from education professionals in written evidence was how those designated mental health leads will be able to do their job. It was not clear from the evidence we heard from the Minister for School Standards that adequate resources will be in place to equip those teachers with the skills they need to do that role. That is why we recommend that there

[Luciana Berger]

should be a specific payment and that it should be a senior role. That is also why we recommend that mental health professionals should not be a contingency; the first port of call should be those professionals in mental health, who have a fuller and wider training to be able to fulfil that role, rather than relying on teachers, who already have a massive burden.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I welcome this very valuable report, and in particular paragraphs 31 and 32 on building resilience against exam pressure and the effect on mental health of the narrowing of the curriculum. However, rather than building resilience against something that is likely to be causing part of the problem, did the Select Committee ever consider suggesting an independent root-and-branch reform of the assessment system, and in particular key stage 1 and 2 SATS, which we hear are a large cause of this problem up and down the country?

Luciana Berger: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. Some people are keen to paint this issue as being just to do with social media, which is why I sought to address in my remarks the fact that, in the view of many who sit on the Committees, the No. 1 concern is the academic system. That is why one of our recommendations says that:

“the Government should gather independent evidence concerning the impact of exam pressure on young people’s mental health”.

We want to see that right through the entire education system, including the stages she mentioned.

We also need to look at the narrowing of the curriculum. We heard from young people about the pressures they felt that that put on them, which was exacerbating their mental health issues. We would like to see that addressed. We were disappointed with the response from the Minister for School Standards, who said that there was no connection or correlation between the two. We heard clear evidence that it has a very negative impact on too many young children in this country.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for making such a compelling case on behalf of the two Select Committees. This is a very important report. One problem with the slowness of assessment and treatment is that cases often end up in the courts, which costs a fortune and means that things play out in a spirit of confrontation between parents and the authorities. That cannot be any good for the children. Does she agree that we ought to do something about that?

Luciana Berger: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. We are clear that too many children are ending up in crisis and needing support. It might ultimately end up in the courts, but they are definitely in crisis. That is not good for them, their families, the NHS or society. I do not like to talk about this in financial terms, but it comes at a massive cost to society. For all those reasons, we should be doing everything possible to prevent mental ill health in our young people in the first place. If we cannot prevent it—we cannot prevent everything—we should at least intervene earlier, for financial reasons but also for the social and moral reason that it is important to give every child in this country the best chance in life.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Several Members have mentioned the need for interventions for the under-fives. My hon. Friend visited the Bangor mindfulness centre in north Wales with me a couple of years ago. A curriculum for three to seven-year-olds is being developed in north Wales. What role does she think mindfulness can play in infant, junior, secondary and tertiary education?

Luciana Berger: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I have had the opportunity to see at first hand the benefits of mindfulness, particularly in education. I look forward to seeing the results of the curriculum being developed for three to seven-year-olds. We did not specifically address that in our inquiry and report, but it could be contained within the PSHE curriculum that we would like to see introduced in all schools, both primary and secondary, and could particularly target the under-fives. The Government should look closely at that.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that young people are self-medicating due to stress, because they cannot get access to the mental health services that they need? Does she think that that is worthy of note in the report?

Luciana Berger: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. While we did not talk about that explicitly in our report, we were able to have an informal discussion with young people from across the country, including young people being cared for by Place2Be, a mental health organisation that supports young people in schools. Young people said they were turning to illegal medication or prescription medication that they were getting through illegal means to make themselves feel better. That is clearly an issue for our young people. I know that my hon. Friend has raised that in the House, and I hope the Government will look specifically at it.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I would like to thank members of both Select Committees for this very forthright report. I was pleased to be part of the inquiry, and I would particularly like to thank the hon. Lady for bringing the report to the House. It is one of the most important reports for the next generation.

I want to raise two particular points. The first relates to workforce planning. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on psychology and as a psychologist, I was very concerned by the evidence that educational psychology training places are being reduced and clinical psychology training places are currently inadequate, despite the fact that the Government’s delivery of the strategy relies very much on supervision from those key professionals. Secondly, we need to be targeting complex groups where more than one difficulty is present, such as the many children with autistic spectrum disorder who also suffer mental health problems comorbidly. Much more must be done on access to autism diagnosis alongside treatment and early intervention for mental health issues.

Luciana Berger: I thank the hon. Lady for her important contribution, which emphasised the need to focus on the workforce that the Government are expecting to deliver their Green Paper plans. We know that Health Education England is due to publish in July this year its

workforce strategy, and I sincerely hope that it has listened to the points we heard in the Committee and those that she just made about the massive gap that exists in terms of psychologists and child psychiatrists in the community. That is a critical issue.

On the hon. Lady's point about comorbidities, there is a gaping hole in the Government's Green Paper on the children who are the most vulnerable and need the most support. There are references to children from the most vulnerable backgrounds, but nothing in practice about how that might be addressed. I hope that, in the Government's response, they will reflect on our recommendations and seek to bring forward proposals that target children who most need support.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the way she has introduced the report and the Select Committees on producing it. She will know that YoungMinds and NHS Providers have expressed concerns about the fact that increasingly high eligibility thresholds for child and adolescent mental health services mean that the mental ill health of children and young people escalates to crisis point before a referral. That was reinforced by the Care Quality Commission's thematic review, which recently reported that GPs were telling children to pretend to be more ill than they were, to ensure they got treatment. There is much for the Government to respond to in the report, but will she join me in calling on them to investigate that urgently?

Luciana Berger: I thank my hon. Friend for her important contribution. On the thresholds over which children have to jump to access services in the first place, I get emails almost every week from young people or their parents or carers, sharing their experiences of how long it has taken them to get access to services, if they have even been able to get through the door at all. Young people are having to attempt to take their lives before they see a clinical professional. That is not acceptable, and the Government need to address it now if they are going to successfully implement their plans.

One of our recommendations was that within the mental health investment standard introduced by the Government to ensure that clinical commissioning groups apportion a certain amount of funds to mental health, there should be a specific ring fence for children and young people's mental health. We know from the investigations and research that has been done that at the moment, too many clinical commissioning groups are diverting money away from young people's mental health to other parts of the NHS. It is under enormous strain, but that money needs to be protected.

Point of Order

1.29 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Further to my urgent question on the learning disabilities mortality review on 8 May and my point of order later that day, when questioned about the timing of the publication of that review at 8 am on 4 May in the middle of the local election results, the Care Minister, who is in her place, said:

"It is an independent document and the University of Bristol decided when it was going to be published. It was published on Friday without permission from or any kind of communication with the Department of Health and Social Care."—[*Official Report*, 8 May 2018; Vol. 640, c. 553.]

The Minister has now written to me to say that she has been misinformed and that she now admits that NHS England had discussed the timing of the publication and had agreed the date. Also, in a statement yesterday, the learning disabilities review team said:

"All communication about the report, prior to and subsequent to its publication, was directed by NHS England, as was the date of its publication."

The Minister also admits that the Department of Health and Social Care was notified about the publication by NHS England.

The key point is that, in December 2016, the Secretary of State told the House that he was asking the learning disabilities mortality review programme to provide annual reports to the Department of Health on its findings. The Minister is now saying that the Department was notified about the report only on an unofficial basis. Why was such an important report, dated December 2017, not published until 2018? The Care Minister says she was misinformed by her officials. Is the Secretary of State in charge of this Department or is he not?

In the other place, the Health Minister said of the publication of the review report:

"I agree with her that the timing was less than ideal...I agree it was not done as it should have been".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 9 May 2018; Vol. 791, c. 207.]

We have not had an apology from a Health Minister on this matter in this House, but it was this House that was misinformed. Let us remember that the people most affected by this mess are the family members of the over 1,300 people with learning disabilities whose early deaths the Government should be taking more seriously.

Mr Deputy Speaker, have you been notified that the Secretary of State wants to explain himself to the House about this mess and to issue an apology to the bereaved families, or does the Minister want to do so now?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): What I would say is I do know a correction is printed today from the Minister responsible, and it is on the record. I do not know whether the Minister wishes to come in at this stage. No? I have certainly not been given any indication from the Secretary of State that they are coming forward. What I would say is that it is on the record, and if there needs to be a further correction, I am sure that will be taken on board.

Backbench Business

Banking Misconduct and the FCA

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Treasury Committee on 31 October 2017, on the work of the Financial Conduct Authority, HC 475; Oral evidence taken before the Treasury Committee on 30 January 2018, on RBS's Global Restructuring Group and its treatment of SMEs, HC 737; Written evidence received by the Treasury Committee on the work of the Financial Conduct Authority, HC 475; Written evidence received by the Treasury Committee on RBS's Global Restructuring Group and its treatment of SMEs, HC 737; Skilled persons report into the treatment of customers in RBS's Global Restructuring Group prepared for the FCA, reported to the House and published on 20 February 2018; Correspondence between the Chair of the Treasury Committee and (a) the Chief Executive of the Financial Conduct Authority and (b) the Chief Executive of Royal Bank of Scotland, relating to the report into the Royal Bank of Scotland Global Restructuring Group, reported to the House and published on 14 September, 17 October, 25 October, 31 October and 28 November 2017 and 17 January, 7 February, 16 February, 20 February, 27 February and 28 March 2018.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call Martin Whitfield to move the motion, with up to 15 minutes to speak to it.

1.32 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House welcomes the public disclosure of the Section 166 report into the conduct of RBS Global Restructuring Group (GRG); is concerned about the fundamental difference of tone and emphasis between the summary produced by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) and the full report; believes this calls into question the strength and independence of the regulator; notes that the concerns raised in the debate on 18 January with regard to the financial services sector, which is not limited to RBS and its advisors, not only persist, but are amplified by the conclusions in the report; calls on HM Treasury to instruct the FCA to move on to phase 2 of the investigation into the root causes of the conduct of RBS GRG by a body independent to the FCA; and once again calls for an independent inquiry into the financial services sector and the associated industries that have allowed misconduct to thrive, and the establishment of an independent mechanism for redress for businesses.

I would like to start by paying tribute to the Backbench Business Committee for enabling this debate to take place and to the enthusiastic work of the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking and finance, of which I am vice-chair and which is led by the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). I would also like to take the opportunity to thank the hon. Members for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack), who supported my application for this debate. I also thank those who have travelled down today to listen to the debate live from the Public Gallery.

This debate follows on from the one led by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) in January. It demonstrates what an important issue this is for not only our individual constituents but the whole economy. For many, the foundation of the problem is

illustrated by bank closures. Indeed, in my constituency, bank closures and the disappointing remission of free-to-use ATM machines are breaking down trust in the banking industry. Ensuring that consumers have access to finance is fundamental to the ethos of community banking.

Today's debate rightly shifts attention to financial misconduct and considers the section 166 report, but it also stands as a timely reminder to the entire banking sector that the consumer must always be at the centre of its operations. Access to finance is so important to local businesses in East Lothian and across the UK. Whether wronged by commercial lending policies not fit for purpose or hit disproportionality by bank closures, businesses are being badly let down by the industry.

Regarding financial misconduct, a lot has happened since January, and we are not simply here to cover an old story.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Does he agree that it is not just businesses that suffer? It is also families and people's mental health. Nigel and Julie Morgan, who are here with us today listening to the debate, have been adversely affected by this issue for years. It is that which we have to bear in mind.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's intervention. It is right to say that, behind every one of these statistics, there are individuals, families, businesses and employees—who have their own families—who have suffered as a result of all this. I will come on to that in a moment.

The release of the section 166 report into Royal Bank of Scotland's Global Restructuring Group not only underlined the toxic culture that existed in the GRG but, critically, identified the systemic failures that allowed such conduct to thrive.

Today I intend to focus on three key points. The first is dispute resolution, which has been covered extensively, and the all-party parliamentary group will deliver a report on it in the near future. Secondly, I would like to look at the associated industries involved in this scandal. Thirdly, there is the need for a full public inquiry into the treatment of businesses by financial institutions.

As the debate progresses, I would ask hon. Members to keep at the forefront of their minds the very simple notion of the balance of power and, indeed, the abuse of power, because that is ultimately what we are addressing here, not just with RBS but across the entire ecosystem of commercial lending. We have only to look at the HBOS Reading fraud to understand how corrupt the system can be and how that can thrive if it goes unchecked year after year.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on opening this important debate. Does he agree that one issue is the continuing refusal of many in the banking sector to accept their responsibility and their determined deflection of blame back to their customers?

Martin Whitfield: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. There is genuine anger about banking businesses not taking responsibility for their actions and not looking to rectify the damage that was done in

the past. That is what is fundamentally undermining the confidence that people and businesses have in the banking sector.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): The hon. Gentleman will obviously concentrate most of the time on activities inside banks themselves. Will he also touch on one of the issues raised by my constituents, who, like many others, have been affected by this—the activities of insolvency practitioners? There seem to be deep problems there as well.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's intervention. I am just moving on to talk about the fact that although there are very legitimate objectives at the turnaround units that many banks have operated, they are so easily manipulated to carry out systematic asset stripping of small and medium-sized enterprises. Indeed, it is the surveyors, insolvency practitioners, turnaround consultants, Law of Property Act receivers, lawyers and accountants that support financial institutions and enable and facilitate the systematic abuse that was so clearly laid bare in the section 166 report who must also be held to account for these failings.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): The hon. Gentleman mentioned the section 166 report. I understand that the second phase has now been brought in-house into the Financial Conduct Authority. Promontory has ended its role. There is a concern on the part of many people that there will be a lack of transparency. There is a concern about a further possible cover-up of really serious wrongdoing.

Martin Whitfield: Again, I am really grateful for that insightful interjection. There clearly is a concern about transparency. Beyond the single events—tragic as many of these are—the overall story and picture that people are taking away about our banking industry is its being heavily influenced by hidden-door decisions, by delayed reports and by people, frankly, trying to protect themselves rather than shining a light on what has been happening to try to make the system better for the future.

Here we are again, talking about past misconduct. However, this is the catch, and it was mentioned early on: for business owners across the country who have lost their livelihoods, their homes, their marriages and, quite often, their health, this is not an issue of past misconduct; it greets them every single day when they wake up and haunts them at night when they go to sleep.

The impact of this scandal has been so profoundly damaging that people have taken the appalling decision to end their lives because they cannot face things any more. It is the responsibility of this House and of the financial services—it is genuinely the responsibility of everyone—to ensure that there are answers to these questions so that, hopefully, and at last, some people and some families can find some peace.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): The hon. Gentleman rightly draws attention to the appalling stress that has been placed on individuals. That has happened in my constituency due to RBS and the Britannia building society acting entirely unfairly towards my constituents. Apart from the behaviour of the banks, is there not an issue about the ability of such

individuals to obtain redress, and the failure of our institutions—such as the FCA and the ombudsman—to be able to offer satisfactory relief to individuals so badly affected?

Martin Whitfield: Again, that is an excellent intervention. It is almost as if planned, because I am about to turn to the question of dispute resolution.

The FCA's recent consultation into extending the Financial Ombudsman Service clearly sets out the complex landscape of commercial disputes, but it also identifies what it can and cannot do as a regulator to bridge this gap. The all-party group is very clear that it cannot possibly support the proposed extension of the Financial Ombudsman Service as a stand-alone solution to problems that have beset the business community for so long. Even with extended powers, it will not be sufficient to cover complex cases or those that sit outside the regulatory perimeters. The FCA's consultation makes it very clear that it has limited powers and that a complete solution must include action by the Government and this Parliament. It is not an either/or; we need both.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): This is not a partisan point, but one about the current and previous Governments: schemes executed by the Government, such as the enterprise finance guarantee scheme, have been misused by RBS, but RBS has been retained under some element of public ownership, if not control, so will my hon. Friend call on the Government to look at the schemes they have operated and at their performance in helping to support colleagues and constituents such as mine?

Martin Whitfield: Again, I am grateful for that intervention. Clearly, at the end of the day, this goes to the question of a public examination of what has happened and where things have gone wrong. RBS is obviously still held by the public through the shares we bought when we bailed it out, but even without that, there is still a responsibility to make sure that the banking and financial sectors apply rules and laws equitably, fairly and transparently, and do not seek to put down small and medium-sized businesses to their own benefit.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I endorse what the hon. Gentleman is saying because there is a real issue about redress. The lives of my constituents Mr and Mrs Neave have been ruined by this UK banking episode. I have seen their reams of correspondence with the FCA and the ombudsman, yet all these organisations ever seem to say is that there is no case to answer. People then turn to their MPs, but there is nothing we can do. Is not the time ripe for the UK Government to ensure redress, perhaps by way of a tribunal process or something like that?

Martin Whitfield: Absolutely. On dispute resolution, the introduction of a tribunal would be an important and essential step forward, giving access to people and businesses that at the moment struggle to gain access to the courts.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): My constituent Mr Kashourides, who has no confidence in the FCA or the ombudsman, has himself brought legal action against RBS, but he has been asked by a judge to pay £150,000 as a surety for costs, because the

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

lawyers that RBS employs are very expensive. Does my hon. Friend agree that a tribunal would be the best way forward?

Martin Whitfield: Absolutely. The cost of bringing a case to get rectification is so important.

The FCA has repeatedly said that it does not have the powers to deal with commercial lending and that it is up to Parliament to decide if it wants those powers to be extended. However, in various statements, the Treasury has repeatedly stated that this is a matter for the FCA and that if the FCA feels it needs more powers, it should ask for them. All that is happening is that this hot potato is being kicked between two different areas, and we are not getting answers that, in reality, are satisfactory to anyone. I would appreciate clarification from the FCA on the parameters of what it needs in order for it to ask for more powers. At the moment, we are seeing the widespread and systematic destruction of British businesses, which in my mind certainly seems to qualify as a reason to request additional powers.

The lack of mechanisms for redress and of action in general has severely undermined public confidence in the integrity of our system, and it is time that we tackled this head-on. We are therefore calling today for a full public inquiry into the ecosystem of commercial lending, and particularly into the treatment of businesses in financial distress. This cross-departmental issue covers both the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Treasury, so it is too wide-reaching to come under the remit of just one Select Committee in Parliament.

I will briefly turn to the role of professional advisers and the wider issue of commercial funding. I welcome the focus that section 166 has placed on the inherent conflict of interest that exists between financial institutions, surveyors, lawyers and insolvency practitioners. For too long, we have focused solely on financial institutions, but not on the professionals that support them, often in the form of secondments from within the walls of the very financial institutions themselves. Frankly, it beggars belief that this is an accepted industry practice. The mechanisms involved in taking control of businesses and their assets are operated via LPA receivers and insolvency practitioners.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree with me that these professional practitioners are quite often working hand in glove with the banks? Does he also agree that the fees, particularly in insolvency practice, are very high, which, on top of the issue with the banks, can push businesses under?

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I would draw attention to the very basic case of those owning a business that has constantly paid back its loans on time and maintained contact with the bank, who may suddenly, through a simple slip of a pen in the valuation or revaluation of the business by part of the bank's organisation, find themselves in breach of their loans—and they lose their business. That is not a question for the shareholders or for the directors; with a movement of a pen, their business becomes the bank's.

RBS has been at pains to point out that the Promontory report did not find any evidence of deliberate undervaluations, but in any event the report could not in many cases find any evidence about how valuations were conducted, and there is a suggestion that they were simply made up. These valuations could then be used to appoint an insolvency practitioner, subject to huge costs, and a cosy relationship between a surveyor, an insolvency practitioner and a bank suddenly means that another family business has been lost.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): My constituent Kashif Shabir, whom I have spoken about in several debates on this issue, has been the victim of exactly that, with Lloyds bank and Alder King surveyors in Bristol, resulting in the loss of his £10 million business. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that the bosses of both those organisations, Mr Horta-Osório and Mr Martyn Jones, should now proactively take steps to offer—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady must sit down. I am really sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady, who I appreciate is making a very important point. I must point out, however, that the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), who is moving the motion, is supposed to take about 15 minutes. He has a lot to say that is of importance, and he has been very generous in allowing interventions, but hon. Members must not think I have not noticed that the people who have intervened will then go away, while the people who have indicated that they wish to take part in the debate will have only four minutes and may need to stay in the Chamber until the end of the debate, which is patently unfair. I cannot allow a long intervention. It is perfectly proper for the hon. Lady to ask a quick question, but it is not in order for hon. Members to make an intervention in lieu of a speech, thus preventing other Members from making a speech. I am trying to ensure fairness, and it is really quite difficult to do so. As I had not previously warned hon. Members, I will allow the hon. Lady to finish her intervention—I realise that she has something important to say—and I will allow the hon. Gentleman to respond to it and to finish his speech. I hope that everyone has got the picture: this is the only way to try to be fair to everyone.

Jo Stevens: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. Does my hon. Friend agree that the banks and the surveyors should proactively take steps now to offer redress to my constituent and to many other constituents of Members on both sides of the House?

Martin Whitfield: Absolutely. I agree with that proposal, because the banks and the surveyors have professional responsibilities to their clients and those they serve, and such responsibilities apply equally by omission as by action.

To conclude, from its early inception, banking was engineered to become a focal hub of community engagement. There was a societal bond of trust, which was represented by the strong institutions on our high streets. In recent years, however, this has become synonymous with mistrust and deceit. Consumers right across the country have been let down not just by a few specific banks, but by an industry that has developed and become polluted by a toxic culture of misconduct.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. As I have said, we are pushed for time this afternoon. There will therefore be a time limit on Back-Bench speeches, initially of five minutes although it may have to be reduced.

1.50 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) on securing this debate, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) who chairs the all-party group on fair business banking and finance.

I would normally begin by saying what a pleasure it is to speak in such a debate, but although it is always a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, I do not feel that such a sentiment is appropriate, given the seriousness of the issues we are discussing. It is clearly far from a pleasure for thousands of business owners up and down the country who have had their lives and livelihoods destroyed by a broken, and in places rotten, banking system. As I have done previously, I shall refer in particular to one of my constituents, Mr Eric Topping, whose business was destroyed by the iniquity we are debating today.

There is clearly no easy solution to the mess we are in—it is hard to find a solution to get the redress that so many victims deserve, to rebuild crushed livelihoods, or to restore public faith in the system. There are, however, three steps to take, each of which might help in part. First, we need some form of acknowledgement that what my constituent, Mr Topping, has suffered is an outrage and an injustice. His complaint was dismissed out of hand because the issue occurred in 1998, and therefore outside the “relevant period” that was set arbitrarily at between 2008 and 2013. Whatever form of redress the Government, regulators or banks come up with, they must consider events before 2008 and the narrow scope of the FCA’s skilled persons reports. They must also look beyond RBS GRG, and into its precursor bodies such as the “specialised lending service”, and any other sham department, in whatever bank, that was engaged in systematic and organised fraudulent asset stripping.

Secondly, it is clear that the Financial Ombudsmen Service lacks teeth as a method of redress, given that in most instances it can look only at cases involving microbusinesses with 10 employees or fewer. With claims capped at £150,000, thousands of SMEs affected by this scandal cannot apply. There is a clear problem for businesses with more than 10 employees, as their only option is to go to the courts. That is too expensive and places small businesses against international financial institutions, which is a complete mismatch.

In a move that would be laughable if it were not so unjust, in the bank’s final letter to Mr Topping, RBS’s director of operations suggested that he seek redress through the Financial Ombudsmen Service, and helpfully enclosed a leaflet to that effect. RBS knew, however, that Mr Topping’s business was too large to come within the scope of the ombudsmen’s remit, and by suggesting such a move it was either incompetent in its advice or it was simply mocking him—I am not sure which is worse.

Proposals for enlarging the remit of the ombudsman are not the answer—as I have said, it lacks teeth—and there is a gap in the current structure that must be filled. It is necessary to have a completely independent system or tribunal that sits outside the regulatory structure and has sufficient powers and knowledge to deal with complex financial disputes that include contracts, insolvency and all associated issues. Such a system must be able to address the backlog of legacy cases and ensure that those who have been mistreated are given an outlet through which their grievances can be heard, and suitable redress awarded. Any system will need to address the statute of limitations so that victims are not barred from taking action.

Finally, as I have said, these issues are no longer just about RBS or even the banks themselves, and it is clear that we have had a systemic failure. This issue has become too wide ranging for either the Treasury, the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, or even the excellent all-party group on fair business banking and finance to deal with, and it is now of such scale and complexity that it demands a full public inquiry. A scandal such as this, just like LIBOR before it, is yet another reason why people and businesses lose faith in the banking sector. Faith in the banks is essential for faith in our whole economy, but SMEs, which are the lifeblood of that economy, are now reluctant to borrow from such institutions. A full public inquiry would be to the benefit of financial institutions, the business community and the wider economy. We must draw a line under the past, obtain redress for our constituents who have been the victims of financial misconduct and create an environment in which trust in financial institutions can be restored.

1.55 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) on securing this debate.

My constituents were private tenants who had lived above a shop for many years and brought up their children. In 2007, they decided to buy the property when it came up for sale at auction. They were customers of NatWest, which agreed that they could have a mortgage for 10 years. They bought the property on 6 July 2007, and were contacted by the bank to pay valuation fees. The valuation should have informed the bank that my constituents needed a regulated mortgage, since they occupied more than 40% of the property. On 9 July, NatWest informed my constituents that they needed to open a joint bank account, take out a one-year business loan and pay £4,000 in fees for the privilege. That was due to the fact that the premises included a shop. One year later they were allowed to take out a two-year loan, again with more arrangement fees. They thought that was normal, because they did not understand that they should have had a regulated mortgage contract.

This debate is about small and medium-sized enterprises, but my constituents were forced to become an SME, and they were treated appallingly by NatWest. They did not understand the system, and the bank took full advantage of that. They continued to pay the loan without any defaults. After the two-year loan period expired, the bank attempted to contact them, but that was cancelled due to the snow. They finally met up five months after the two-year loan had expired in 2011. In

[Clive Efford]

May 2011, the bank told my constituents that they were in default. That resulted in a complaint to the bank, which found in favour of my constituents. However, the bank continued to pursue them, asking them to sell the property.

My constituents made a further complaint, and on 19 January 2012 they received a response from the bank's complaints department, which said that it was nothing to do with anything they had done, but that:

"The bank needs to rebalance its exposure in the property area. We have twice as much property funding as any of our competitors and this needs to be managed down to more normal levels."

It was nothing to do with anything my constituents had done wrong; it was what the bank had done wrong, yet my constituents were forced to pay for it. While that was going on, the bank tried to close one of my constituents' bank accounts, and from then on they were harried into selling the property. It was put on the market for £700,000, but because they were under pressure, they finally had to sell it for £585,000. They were never given the opportunity to live in that property and plan ahead with any confidence.

My constituents finally went to the Financial Ombudsman and requested a disclosure of documents. They discovered that they were being dealt with by none other than the Royal Bank of Scotland Global Restructuring Group, despite having taken out the original loan with NatWest. GRG convinced the ombudsman not to investigate the case and to leave it to the GRG disputes resolution process. When my constituents asked how the involvement of GRG came about, they were told that it was due to the involvement of a specialist relationship manager. GRG claims that the account was never transferred to it and states that the SRM consulted GRG during the relevant period of 2008 to 2013. Therefore, GRG did not recognise my constituents, and they were not part of the review process. My constituents were never informed of any of this; it came to light because they complained and asked for documents to be disclosed by the ombudsman. GRG also convinced the ombudsman not to look at any documents going back further than 2013.

NatWest is part of the RBS group, but it operates under a separate licence. How is it possible for two separate banking organisations to share customers' information in this way? Is that a matter of concern to the FCA? Are NatWest and RBS GRG at fault for not keeping my constituents informed? The bank made the initial error when it forced my constituents to take a loan for one year, then two years, then no years—it simply failed to renew it—and then foreclosed on my constituents because it was overexposed in the property market. My constituents approached the FCA, but they do not know where their case now is. The FCA has to hold an inquiry into this matter. We have to get to the bottom of it on behalf of people who are just being bullied by the banks.

2 pm

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this very important debate and I thank the all-party group on fair business banking for securing it. There are literally thousands of victims of this banking scandal.

They are victims not of banks, but of bankers and their advisers who colluded with them—make no mistake about it.

This has not been a golden era for British banking and neither has the FCA covered itself in glory. It has presided over ad hoc redress schemes that are simply not fit for purpose. It has allowed banks to be judge, jury and executioner. It could learn from the best British regulator, the Takeover Panel. If one goes to the Takeover Panel for a decision on a Thursday, one receives it on a Friday. The FCA has allowed the banks to set up their own redress schemes, which have gone on too slowly for too long and have been too small in terms of financial retribution.

Victims have been fighting this situation for years. Their lives have been destroyed: it is not just livelihoods, some have lost or taken their lives. Families have been torn apart and businesses have been lost. Frankly, they have been the victim of banking piracy. I said that in the Treasury Committee yesterday and I say it again today. If the other banks have a pile six inches high, RBS-GRG has a mountain. It set up a scheme of £400 million. Some £100 million of that has been allocated to costs, leaving only £300 million to pay people back. It has paid out £150 million so far, but that does not even scratch the surface. GRG was a profit centre. In 2011, it made £1.2 billion in profit. Considering the profits it has made by knocking on people's doors and taking their businesses away from them, £300 million is just scratching the surface. It is paltry and pathetic.

The fact that these crimes were committed is not something I am imagining. Excellent reports are available from Tomlinson and Promontory, as has been discussed. We knew crimes had been committed, but what the victims have not seen is any form of justice. I do not just mean financial justice. I mean prosecutions. For banking to clean up its act and for this not to happen again in the future there need to be more prosecutions.

In the first debate secured by the all-party group on fair business banking, I spoke of my own experience. I know at first hand how GRG behaved. I was not a victim. It came twice to try to take a very good asset away from us. The business was making a profit in each of the months when it came and it has made a profit in every month since. That did not, however, stop it trying to come up with artificial breach covenants and other trumped up reasons to try to create fees. I understand that people were under pressure. If they were not in a robust position after the financial downturn, they were, I am afraid, taken to the cleaners.

I will conclude by saying that the worst offender was RBS GRG. The perception is still there that it cannot be trusted to do the right thing. Proper redress for the victims would be a very good place to start.

2.4 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) and I agree with every word he said. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) on securing the debate and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

The case for both an independent tribunal and a full public inquiry is overwhelming: the destruction of businesses, the destruction of lives, the ruin it has

caused for families and the appalling treatment of whistleblowers. Brave people chose to speak out, risking everything. My constituent Mark Wright has seen his career and his health destroyed. He is a brave man still left waiting. What I would say to the Minister is this: this issue unites the House. There is complete agreement on both sides of the House on the need for something to happen. We have been debating this matter for quite some time and I do not really feel any sense of progress being made. I am afraid to say that I have lost confidence in the FCA's ability to get to the bottom of the extreme wrongdoing that we have witnessed across our banking sector. This issue causes so much anger among people across our country. There is a sense that the elite got away with it without any consequences. I therefore say to the Minister: take seriously the sentiment on both sides of the House and call a public inquiry without further delay.

I want to raise an additional issue, which has the potential for further scandal: the risk that victims of the shareholder action against RBS and victims of GRG could face further loss as a result of the behaviour claims management companies and the failure of regulation and the policing of those regulations by the Ministry of Justice. The regulations were brought in by the Compensation Act 2006. Any claims management company that operates as a business needs to be regulated, yet the claims management company that worked on the shareholders' action has never been regulated at all. This has been brought into sharp focus because of the action in that case. There has been a settlement of £200 million, but victims are still waiting for most of the money to be distributed. There are concerns about a £20 million bill from a firm called Evaluesafety linked to a certain Gerard Walsh, who has been involved from the very start. He has a track record of personal and business insolvency and has faced allegations of fraud, yet when concerns are raised with the MOJ it seems satisfied by assurances given by a lawyer associated with Gerard Walsh that everything is fine and that regulation is not relevant in this case. However, lawyers have advised the action group company that it comes within the regulatory remit and yet the MOJ does nothing.

I am really concerned about a double jeopardy here: people who have already lost through the appalling behaviour of RBS are now at risk of losing again with the settlement money leaking out all over the place, potentially improperly, and the victims left still waiting. The Ministry of Justice is doing nothing to get to grips with this. These are Government regulations passed through this House. The MOJ—I urge the Minister to have words with his ministerial colleagues—needs to get a grip. There are criminal sanctions where there is a failure to properly register in the regulation system. These people, if they are taking money out of the settlement pot away from innocent victims, need to be pursued. I do not know what the solution is and I do not know the full facts of the case, but I absolutely know that it needs to be investigated as a matter of urgency.

This is a long-running scandal. So many people have lost out so badly that we will only restore confidence in the banking system and in the system of regulation if we have a full public inquiry. The Government need to order it now.

2.9 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) and the all-party group on fair business banking on securing the debate. I follow very powerful speeches by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack).

A constituent of mine, Mark Nicholson, had an experience with HSBC that raises exactly the issue as many of the RBS cases. He has been in dispute with that bank for eight long, stressful years. His business initially had a cash-flow problem, through no fault of his, and the bank turned his secured loan first into an overdraft and then offered him a nine-year loan. However, despite complying with every single condition, the promised nine-year loan was never forthcoming and he was instead put on a treadmill and offered a series of short, one-year loans at increasingly high interest rates, with increasingly high charges.

In 2014, the Financial Ombudsman Service ruled against HSBC, telling it to restructure the loan and to repay all the charges. Instead of complying with the spirit of the ruling, the bank seized on a lack of detail in it to offer my constituent an onerous loan. After a second ruling, he is still in dispute. The bank is refusing to share the details of how it has calculated the demands that it is making of him, and at the end of this month he faces a court hearing in which he could lose the house that he has lived in for nearly 30 years. It is exactly as my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) said of RBS: it is a case of the pursuit of profits through made-up fees, high interest rates and the attempt to acquire equity and property. I have written to John Flint, the chief executive of HSBC, to support my constituent in this matter, and I plead with him to think again about the way in which his bank is treating my constituent.

The theme of today's debate is the other institutions that surround this important problem. Although the Financial Ombudsman Service has done good work and has helped some people, we must ask two questions: first, does it have the power and authority to make large financial institutions fear it and comply with its rulings? For my constituent and others, we can see that that is not the case. Secondly, does it have the technical capacity to cope with some of the more complex cases that it faces? Another constituent is involved in a technical insurance case, and the Financial Ombudsman Service has not been able to do what we need it to do, which is to level the playing field between large financial institutions with a lot of firepower and ordinary members of the public.

Let me quote some of the things that Channel 4's "Dispatches" discovered when it did an undercover investigation into what was going on in the Financial Ombudsman Service. It talked to trainers and people working within the organisation. Here are some quotes from what it heard:

"Training was not adequate. We rushed through complicated financial issues and processes. I often didn't know what I was doing."

"I'm not proud to admit it but I've done it myself—just taken a chance and just slung stuff through, with any old decision."

"For more complex cases, the right decision isn't always reached. Legitimate claims are being missed."

"even now I look at an investment case and I don't know what to ask for."

[Neil O'Brien]

"Sometimes I've not even heard of the products. I have to Google what it is first."

"11,000 cases fell into a black hole. Two years later we find out they've not been looked at and we had to work our way through them all."

"Some post was two years old. There were cases saying I am going to lose my house."

That is simply not good enough. We need to replace the FOS with something that is fit for purpose, because my constituent also faces losing his house.

It is worth noting that over the last eight years we have made a lot of progress on reforming the financial system. We have introduced measures to increase competition and to encourage challenger banks. We have seen the ring-fencing of retail banking from investment banking. We have replaced the failed tripartite system and ended "too big to fail". We have higher capital requirements, the bank levy and the tougher claw-back regime. A lot has been done, but a lot more needs to be done. The next step now should be to replace the Financial Ombudsman Service, which could do more to help our constituents, with something that has proper expertise and the ability to make large financial institutions, which so often behave in a cruel, high-handed way, frightened of it and get justice for our constituents.

2.14 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): This is an important debate and I congratulate all the hon. Members who have contributed to it so far. Banks occupy a very special and important position in our economy and society. Without them, the economy could not function efficiently. However, they also operate in such a way that they borrow short and lend long, and they always have done. As a result, banks hold a degree of responsibility and trust when they take people's moneys into their care. I am afraid that over the past few decades, as other hon. Members have described, a culture has been allowed to develop under Governments of different colours to allow banks to basically follow the principle that "Greed is good," as so well elucidated in 1980s film "Wall Street". Ultimately, everything that has been described today—the disasters that have been brought upon our constituents—has been born out of the greed of bankers operating not in the interests of our constituents, but to line their own pockets.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend accept that the situation is 10 times worse when the bank no longer exists? I have constituents who are still trying to work through HBOS, which is now part of Lloyds, which has washed its hands of it.

Kevin Brennan: I absolutely accept that; it is completely the case. I want to mention briefly some of my constituents who have been affected by what has been described today and by other practices that should be incorporated in the public inquiry that other hon. Members have called for. By the way, RBS has today been fined \$4.9 billion by the American authorities for its activities when it was expecting to pay something like \$12 billion, so if there is concern in the Treasury about the cost of a public inquiry, we have \$7.1 billion available, given the assumption that was made by RBS, that could be levied on just one of the banks that we are talking about today to cover the cost of any public inquiry. I hope that the Treasury boffins have taken notice of that statistic.

My constituent Mike McGrath was also a victim of the kind of asset stripping we have heard about today. He can show quite clearly that Lloyds bank lied to the Financial Ombudsman Service to obtain a favourable judgment for itself and so that my constituents' complaint was not upheld. The decision arrived at by the Financial Ombudsman Service was based on the probability of the evidence, but that evidence was incomplete, inconclusive or contradictory because Lloyds bank did not provide all the evidence that it should have done to the Financial Ombudsman Service. There was detrimental evidence that would have allowed the adjudicator to find in favour of my constituent—as the law should require them to do. Customers should have the right to complain to the Financial Ombudsman Service and get it to adjudicate quickly, fairly and at little cost. That is why it exists, but Lloyds bank, and I believe others have done the same, has concealed detrimental evidence to prevent that from happening. This left my constituent with the only option of expensive court litigation, which he could little afford, having been ruined and bankrupted by his own bank.

This allowed Lloyds Wholesale Banking Recoveries in Bristol, with the aid of their appointed Law of Property Act receiver, Alder King, which we heard about earlier from my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), to strip the customer's assets, knowing that the customer had in fact given the true account of the facts to the FOS and would have had their complaint upheld had Lloyds bank been truthful. My constituent can show that this has happened on more than one occasion. He believes not only that there should be a public inquiry, but that the Treasury Committee should look at the wider issues that have been raised in this debate and by this scandal for all the people who have been affected by different banks' actions when the banks were bailed out by the Government.

Banks are still engaged in other practices that should be part of any inquiry. That includes what a constituent, Mr Iqbal Hassan, came to see me about last week—the way that a bank can suddenly close down their customers' bank accounts without any notice. In his case, he simply got a text message saying that there were insufficient funds in his bank account and that it had been frozen. He then showed me the letter of apology he received from the bank. The letter gave absolutely no explanation of why the bank—it was Barclays bank in this case—had shut down his bank account. In fact, it said that it did not know why it had happened, but then, a day after that, it closed it completely. Many practices of that kind are going on.

There is also the negligence of banks in relation to customers being defrauded, often over the telephone. They rely on the concept of gross negligence on the part of their customers, which is completely unacceptable. A constituent—I will not name them here, because it is very difficult when this happens—at first lost over £40,000 as a result of this kind of fraud. Fortunately, through the help that I was able to give and through the help of people like Richard Emery—I commend him for his work on this kind of banking fraud—we were able to recover most of my constituent's money. However, there are many similar cases in which Members' constituents are not being refunded money that has been transferred from their accounts to accounts in other banks, which are taking no responsibility for giving harbour to criminals by holding their accounts and paying out money that has been stolen from our constituents.

We should have a public inquiry, and I urge the Minister to talk to his Treasury Minister colleagues about it. I know that he may not be able to make an announcement during today's debate, but I hope he will go away and talk to his colleagues about the requirement for a proper, fully empowered public inquiry to investigate this scandal.

2.20 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan). Let me thank the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) and my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), along with the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking and finance, for securing the debate. This is an incredibly significant issue. As we have heard this afternoon, it has affected many of our constituents, and one of my own, Julia Barrington-Fuller, has informed me that she has been caught up in this terrible episode.

I am here to support a motion that will ensure that if it all goes wrong, such victims of banking malpractice, who, by definition, tend to have limited financial resources, can have sufficient access to justice. I am also here to support a motion that will help us to learn the necessary lessons from this painful episode, while beefing up and altering the powers of the Financial Conduct Authority, which is not up to scratch. Above all, I am here to support a motion that will increase confidence in our financial system, in which small and medium-sized enterprises currently seem to have little faith, as they are reluctant to borrow from financial institutions. That, in turn, has a negative impact on productivity and growth, and anything that has a detrimental impact on the Great British economy is simply unacceptable.

It is clear to me that passing the motion would go a long way to deliver change by creating an environment in which some of our financial institutions are no longer able to abuse hard-working business owners. That is, unfortunately, what we saw in Ms Barrington-Fuller's case. There have been clear examples of mis-selling during her dealings with the Royal Bank of Scotland. For example, she asked RBS for a fixed-rate loan in 2008, but was instead given an agreement that included swap protection for 10 years. That meant that her business was now fully exposed to interest-rate variance, leaving it with crippling monthly swap payments of £7,000 per quarter, on top of her loan repayments. Moreover, the continuation of the loan agreement was dependent on an RBS renewal after five years, which was then refused. As a result the swap agreement was broken, and the penalties for breaking that agreement were levied—penalties that Ms Barrington-Fuller was told did not exist when she took out her loan.

Those penalties and charges forced Julia Barrington-Fuller and her brothers to close their family business, while RBS is continuing to seek a repayment of £250,000, along with any moneys outstanding on the loan and six years' interest. In her words,

"these people are deceiving small businesses and ruining lives for their own personal gain."

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that poor lending practices and the selling of interest-rate swaps, combined with no examination whatsoever—absolutely no redress apart from, perhaps,

repayment of the cost of the swaps—has forced some of our constituents, such as my constituent Mr Steve Gray, to close their businesses?

Giles Watling: I do agree, and that is why I am supporting the motion today. Julia Barrington-Fuller requested an agreement, but that was not the agreement that she finally received. We must have an inquiry into this misconduct; we must ensure that there is sufficient compensation for victims; and we must ensure that the Financial Conduct Authority is truly fit for purpose. We can only rebuild trust in our financial services by ensuring that institutions are held responsible in situations like the one I have described.

We hear too often about how our banks have been caught up in yet another scandal, the victims of which are not the bankers themselves but the hard-working people who rely on them to support their aspirations. People like Julia Barrington-Fuller and her brothers, who ran a successful business, are now struggling in circumstances not of their making. It is so disappointing that we are constantly revisiting this situation, especially in the case of RBS. This is a bank that the taxpayers paid £45 billion to bail out, and which now appears to be seeking to exploit those very taxpayers. It seems that the banks have learned nothing from the 2008 crash, an episode that Simon Jack of the BBC described this morning as

"the biggest banking debacle in UK corporate history."

Indeed it was. It would appear that, if anything, all that the banks have done is move from a period of selling risky products to a period of mis-selling. Banks cannot be allowed to conduct their business in that way.

What is, perhaps, more ironic is that the loan that Julia Barrington-Fuller and her brothers took out was taken out as a matter of convenience rather than necessity. I understand that they did not need it as such. However, because of RBS misconduct, it was not long before they were in serious financial trouble, which led to their being put into RBS's Global Restructuring Group. GRG, as we all know, was supposedly there to deal with firms that were in financial trouble, but there was no attempt to rescue the firms once they were put there. Instead, it is alleged, its focus was on liquidating companies rather than supporting them through further prudent lending. That is not good for business, and not good for the country as a whole.

2.26 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling). A constituent of mine was affected by this issue 10 years ago, and I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the banks have learnt nothing in that time. It has taken more than a decade for some people to obtain any sort of redress, and that is clearly wrong.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) on securing the debate. It is important that we are now debating the idea of redress and the misconduct of other organisations linked to the banking sector. In the time that I have, I shall focus on the failures of regulatory bodies and how their inaction has thus far failed victims of that misconduct. One of those victims is my constituent Mr Alun Richards, a customer of Lloyds Banking Group. Although

[Chris Elmore]

much publicity has been given to the actions of RBS, Mr Richards's case shows that Lloyds too should shoulder the blame. I have repeatedly detailed in the House the misconduct of which Mr Richards has been a victim at the hands of Lloyds bank, its Bristol recoveries unit and the estate agent Alder King, but for those who are unaware of the case, I will summarise it briefly.

Mr Richards was once a successful, and award-winning, farmer and businessman in west Wales. After setting up an account with Lloyds, however, he was soon left destitute when, without warning, it chose to transfer his account to its recoveries unit in Bristol. While the account remained at the unit, Lloyds managers John Holliday and Andrew Pavey allowed chartered surveyors Jonathan Miles and Julian Smith, of Bristol-based Alder King Estates, to act as Lloyds bank managers. Although no secondment agreement was in place, Miles and Smith were suddenly judge, jury and executioner of Mr Richards's account. A further surveyor, Martin Jones of Swansea-based Lambert Smith Hampton, may also have made decisions despite conflicting interests.

Despite that gross misconduct, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors refused to take action against its members—Miles, Smith and Jones—even when it became apparent that they might have made a management decision and appointed fellow Alder King surveyors as Law of Property Act receivers. Since the incident, Mr Richards has met representatives of the RICS twice. I have written to them many times, but the response on each occasion has been that it is not their problem. When Mr Richards has met them, they have dismissed his concerns and the misconduct of its members. The Association of Property & Fixed Charge Receivers, which represents LPA receivers, and the Insolvency Practitioners Association have also ignored all the claims. Meanwhile, the Solicitors Regulation Authority has refused to consider the actions of its member Richard Hillier of the Bristol-based firm of solicitors TLT, who may have acted with conflicted interests whilst simultaneously representing Lloyds Bank, Alder King and LPA receivers Andrew Hughes and Julian Smith. On top of that, the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants has ignored claims regarding a member of its organisation in Swansea.

In my view, this represents regulatory failure. What has happened to Mr Richards over the last 10 years is more than just an injustice; it has left him without the business that he worked for, and without the career and financial security that he obviously deserves. The misconduct that has taken place across the UK—on, I would argue, an industrial scale—has been swept away by those who have been tasked yet are reluctant to investigate. We need redress for the victims of misconduct and this begins with the regulatory bodies, including the regulatory bodies investigating those members that Members of this House have raised complaints about. I have written to all these organisations, but my letters are often ignored or receive brief, passive responses telling me my concerns and my constituents' concerns are simply not relevant.

The only way we can move forward is by having an inquiry, having more and better regulation, and ensuring our constituents receive the money they have lost. Mr Richards—who is in the Gallery today—is owed

several millions of pounds in redress. This is the only real way forward if we are to help our constituents to get the redress they deserve.

2.30 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): To be honest, I am surprised, if not shocked, that we are having to debate British banking misconduct in 2018. I suppose I must have been naive to believe for so much of my life that all banks, which I have always assumed to be pillars of the establishment, would deal properly, fairly and ethically with their customers. I assumed that one of their primary purposes was to help their customers to succeed in their businesses. It seems I was wrong in so many cases.

Equally, my eyes have been opened with regard to the Financial Conduct Authority. That body operates independently of the Government and its purpose is clear from its title: it is the financial regulatory body for banks in the United Kingdom and is supposed to ensure that they operate fairly as well as legally. But it clearly is not doing its job in the way it regulates how so many banks deal with small and medium-sized enterprises. The body is paid for by charging fees to members of the financial services industry. I am afraid that I must wonder whether that could sometimes influence the way it acts, or perhaps does not act, at least in some cases.

The reason I am speaking today in this debate is that the D'Eye family, all of whom are constituents of mine, have been hit for six by the Royal Bank of Scotland's Global Restructuring Group and Dunbar Bank, owned by Zurich. From the story I have been told, Dean D'Eye and his family, and also his friends, have been terrorised by insolvency professionals working for GRG and Dunbar Bank. That is disgraceful. In my view, banks such as Dunbar and RBS, which have taken part in what I consider to be unethical piracy, must be brought to book. The FCA must play a much bigger part in doing this, rather than standing idly by.

We in Parliament have a duty to insist that loans and funding for our small businesses are regulated fairly, ethically and with sympathy for people trying to make a living and to boost our economy. We also need a mechanism to ensure that past wrongs are put right. To get all this, it looks like we may need a public inquiry. If that is the case, I fully support one being set up as soon as possible.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid that we must now reduce the time limit to four minutes. I am sorry for not giving the next speaker, the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), any notice of that.

2.34 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. To attempt to stay within the time limit, I will abbreviate my contribution. I rise to speak on behalf of two constituents, Mr S and Mr A, who I believe may be in the Public Gallery today, both of whom I have attempted to assist, without success. They have both had a very difficult time.

Mr S is a former owner of a successful club and restaurant business in Chelsea and banked with RBS until 1998. In 1993, his account was suddenly moved to

the Specialised Lending Services division of RBS, which was subsequently renamed Global Restructuring Group. Mr S felt bullied by the bank to appoint its manager as a shadow director. In the eight months of this new management, £500,000 went out of his account and to date remains unaccounted for. His club lost its licence and was forced to close. Prior to the bank's intervention, the value of the business was £2.25 million. At that point, it was just £100,000.

Mr S then spent £25,000 on obtaining a new licence before RBS Specialised Lending Services suddenly ordered payment of £500,000. The bank forced the business to close and tried to develop it for profit. Mr S was evicted from the neighbouring maisonette and made homeless. The bank's actions lost Mr S his home, his business and, ultimately, his wife. Twenty years on, Mr S is still traumatised and has still not recovered financially.

My second constituent is Mr A, the former owner of an estate company in Kent. In this case, the bank was HSBC. The bank agreed to provide partial funding for a £2.2 million development project that started in 2007. It was approximately 75% complete when HSBC stopped the period funding payments. The UK economy was suffering and HSBC's policy was to treat construction projects as a "restricted sector" for loans. This restriction came into effect in early 2008. To continue funding that project, HSBC applied to its central committee in Calcutta, assuring Mr A that his case was nothing more than a formality. To enable the project to continue, Mr A personally funded a further £150,000, exhausting his resources. It took a full year until HSBC confirmed that there would be no further funding. The works stopped, the site was set on fire by local vandals and Mr A was forced to issue court proceedings. Two weeks before the trial, HSBC took action to place the business into receivership, signing a consent order to stop the trial, which was accepted by the High Court, bankrupting Mr A.

Mr A has lost his business; he has lost his house; he has lost his savings. He is now living in rented accommodation and depends on state benefits. He is understandably suffering from stress and has been classified as disabled. The consequences of HSBC's actions are lifelong.

How can it be that in the 21st century banks can behave in this way and are free from any retribution?

2.38 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I am conscious of time, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am disappointed that we are having to debate this matter at all today, let alone for the second time this year.

The section 166 report highlighted that RBS GRG was focused on profit over customer service. I was also interested to note that the Tomlinson report found few examples of businesses entering the RBS GRG then being returned to local management. On a separate, but related, point, in my own dealings with RBS over its closure of three branches in my constituency, it has been clear that customer service is not the bank's priority.

I want to touch briefly on how the actions of RBS GRG have impacted upon my constituents. One constituent, who has been in regular contact, is appalled by the conduct of RBS GRG. He ran his own property development business in my constituency and was in the hands of GRG for a number of years. He was so

aggrieved by its actions that he produced a 19-page report describing in tragic detail the manner in which RBS denied him the opportunity to rebuild the company after it fell into problems, closed down the company, which he had built from scratch, and tried to evict his entire family from the family home. This is but one example. I know that other Members have many more.

Small and medium-sized businesses are the backbone of our economy and often the lifeblood of our communities. They employ our constituents and pay the taxes that fund our public services—taxes that were also used to bail out the banks, including RBS. It is bad enough we had to bail them out in the first place; for those banks then actively to undermine the very source of their rescue is a serious moral, as well as legal, issue that we are right to consider and which we must address.

There is widespread discontent with the banking sector that admittedly is not limited to the actions of RBS but stems from the financial crisis in 2008 and other subsequent high-profile cases, such as that of HBOS Reading. The only way to restore any semblance of confidence in the banking sector is to hold an inquiry into the treatment of SMEs by RBS GRG. I am pleased therefore that the all-party group on fair business banking and finance has called for a public inquiry. I back that call.

The all-party group has laid out three reforms it believes are necessary to move the sector forward, and I am pleased to support its proposals, especially that for a more rigorous and robust dispute resolution procedure. Currently, victims have only two routes available—one via the Financial Ombudsman Service and one via the courts. As we know, the ombudsman does not always have the scope to deal with cases where compensation is worth more than £150,000, while going through the courts is potentially crippling expensive, especially for anyone who has just lost their business.

Any reform must address and tackle the causes that brought us to this point. It is simply not sufficient to recognise that it happened and compensate accordingly—we must improve the current processes and prevent these issues from ever recurring.

2.42 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) for his important and impressive speech earlier and for calling this debate.

I do not want to speak for long, but I do want to say a few words about the importance of restoring faith and trust in our financial institutions. Recent weeks have brought bad news of further bank closures in Scotland and across the United Kingdom by RBS. Three of the targeted branches are in my constituency, in Stepps, Tannochside and Bellshill. We are continually told that branches are being closed because more people are banking online, but what about the disabled, the elderly and others who want to open a new account? I accept that many people bank differently these days, but I take issue with the speed at which change is being forced through and the damage it is doing to communities along the way.

I ask RBS, if it is watching, to think again. Its closure programme is affecting the worst-off and most vulnerable people in my community and many others, as we have heard today, but RBS will never understand the frustration

[Hugh Gaffney]

that customers across Scotland and the United Kingdom feel at these bank closures. Stepps will be a town with no bank at all. That is unacceptable and speaks to the financial isolation and exclusion that can be triggered when these decisions are taken.

I mention all that because our small and medium-sized businesses are going to think twice before seeking to borrow from these financial institutions, and we cannot blame them—not when these banks are prioritising themselves and their profits over the communities they should be serving. They are putting profit before people. I often travel around Scotland and the United Kingdom, and I recently joined the campaign trail around London, and on every high street I see the same thing: “for sale” signs; boarded-up shops; graffiti; small businesses, once a proud part of our communities, closed down, and not because of their own endeavours but because the banking sector did not serve their interests.

This situation worries me hugely, especially as we are about to leave the EU. I campaigned proudly to remain in 2016, and I welcome Labour’s policy on the customs union and those in the Conservative party who might support it. The economic implications for small businesses across Britain of our leaving the EU will be huge, however, and I do not believe we have even started to understand what we need to do to keep them alive and protected from the coming economic shock. I call on the Minister to be loud and proud in getting a better deal for all our constituents and to call a public inquiry so that we can hold the banks to account.

2.45 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) for bringing forward this important debate. Like me, he is an officer of the all-party group on fair business banking and finance, which I co-chair. I also speak today on behalf of Jon and Kerry Welsby and others in my constituency who have suffered as a consequence of the apparent bank-induced failure of business services company Mouchel.

As the motion states, the problems in the banking sector are not restricted to RBS—I will offer evidence to the House later that will widen this debate—but I will deal first with RBS. It is clear that the senior management are directly responsible for what happened, but there are also serious questions that the regulator, the FCA, needs to answer, particularly about how it intends to hold these individuals to account through phase 2 of its inquiry and about the reasons for the fundamental difference in tone and substance between the conclusions of the full report and those of its summary. Its summary sets out its key conclusions, and although it identifies isolated examples of poor practice, it lists eight separate areas where RBS was cleared of blame before later highlighting areas in which widespread inappropriate treatment had occurred.

The full report, released eventually by the Treasury Committee some 15 months later, stated:

“Our central conclusions are that there was widespread inappropriate treatment of customers by GRG”,
that
“in a significant proportion of cases...we assessed”
these businesses

“as being potentially viable”

and that

“the treatment appears likely to have caused material financial distress...for the most part”

as

“a direct result...of the priorities GRG pursued.”

Martin Whitfield: Is it not indicative of the problems of transparency that the delay between the release of the initial report and the full report was unacceptable and that it was only eventually released because of the efforts of Committees of the House and Members of this Chamber?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman makes a strong point. We should thank the Treasury Committee and its Chair for their work.

As I said, these issues are not restricted to RBS. Many will also be familiar with the HBOS Reading scandal, where former bankers and their advisers were jailed for a total of 47 years in 2017 for activities that took place over a decade earlier, prior to the takeover by Lloyds in 2008.

I have recently been sent by one of those convicted, Mr Michael Bancroft—this was kindly facilitated by my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi)—hitherto unreleased documents, including the Project Lord Turnbull report, authored by Lloyds senior manager Sally Masterton, which alleges that senior managers within the bank were aware of the fraud prior to the takeover and the £14 billion Lloyds and HBOS rights issues, yet they took clear, deliberate and documented action to conceal it. Let us be clear: if this is true, it could potentially make the rights issues and the takeover fraudulent. Those named as culpable for non-disclosure in the report include chief executive Andy Hornby, chairman Sir Dennis Stevenson, former CEO James Crosby, corporate CEO Peter Cummings, and the auditors and reporting accountants, KPMG. The all-party parliamentary group will have a full copy of the report and Members will be given access to it. Status, seniority and background cannot be a barrier to justice or to holding to account those who are ultimately responsible for the devastation caused to so many lives and to the wider economy.

Luke Graham: Those papers, which will be made available to the APPG, mention the actions of the auditors, KPMG. Will KPMG be included in the investigation, and should it be the subject of a further debate in this place?

Kevin Hollinrake: They should certainly be included in the wider investigation, which is what I will call for shortly.

The Project Lord Turnbull report raises significant questions. Was there deliberate concealment of the scale of the fraud within HBOS and Lloyds? Who was party to the concealment? Crucially, did the concealment result in significant loss to bank shareholders and to subscribers to the rights issue? We see conflicts of interest in the report and in many other places. They include the auditors, KPMG, giving HBOS a clean bill of health in February 2008, only a few months before its collapse; the audit watchdog, the Financial Reporting Council, seeing no reason to investigate this audit; and the fact that four of the 10 members of the FRC board

are partners at KPMG and that it is chaired by former Lloyds chairman Sir Win Bischoff, who oversaw the £14 billion rights issue.

Our all-party group sets out clearly what steps we now need to take. We need an investigation into the serious concerns raised against Lloyds and HBOS. The FCA must build a reputation as a regulator that acts without fear or favour. We need a new primary dispute resolution mechanism, potentially in the form of a financial services tribunal, which also sets aside the statute of limitations. We need a review of the structure of our financial crime agencies in the light of the evidence now before us to ensure that our system of justice is fit for purpose. Finally, the only way in which we can resolve the deep-seated cultural problems in our banking sector and remove the conflicts of interests that are so prevalent is by way of a full public inquiry.

2.52 pm

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): I wish to use these few short minutes to quote from a letter given to me by Martin Wickens, a chartered accountant who has worked closely with my constituent George Jones, a farmer in my constituency, and with hundreds of other farmers and small and medium-sized enterprises across the country that have fallen foul of the predatory behaviour of many of the banks, accountants, surveyors and solicitors who have perpetrated these crimes. Many of the tactics outlined in Martin's letter were used by those involved in taking money from those SMEs. I want to put an extract from his letter on record in the hope that those who should be investigating these matters will take his evidence seriously and investigate with more vigour. Martin states:

"Despite numerous Complainants reporting the matter to the Police, Solicitors Regulation Authority, Serious Fraud Office and Financial Conduct Authority the matter has not been investigated and repossessions continue. The documentary evidence examined allegedly shows, inter alia, the following in support of the position outlined by The Rt. Hon. Elfyn Llwyd MP and Barrister in his Westminster Debate on the 11th November 2014.

1. Undisclosed conflicts of interest by associated Solicitors, Valuer, Mortgage Broker, Lenders, Business Advisor and LPA Receiver.
2. Valuation Rigging.
3. The payment of substantial secret commissions of up to £92,927 by Commercial First Business Limited to UK Mortgages & Finance Services Ltd, a UK Acorn company.
4. Mortgage Churning and entrapment through destruction of the equity of borrowers by the creation of a vicious spiral of debt by unnecessary and excessive interest, fees and charges in favour of the associated Solicitor Lenders, Mortgage Broker and Valuer by a succession of highly expensive bridging loans.
5. Regulated mortgages advanced as unregulated loans when the lender is not authorised or regulated to do so.
6. Conspiracy to defraud and Document forgery.
7. False accounting and business plans, misrepresentation, unfair relationships in favour of lender, breaches of fiduciary duty and trust, including non-fulfilment of promise to transfer borrowing to cheaper lender.
8. Breach of The Law of Property Act 1925 regarding LPA Receivers fees.
9. Little or no due diligence by lender...and asset based lending with no exit route other than repossession. The average age of the Commercial First Business Limited borrowers is 90...in one case 95...at the end of the 25 or 30 year mortgage term.

10. Separate mortgages on house and land to increase power of lender on repossession and advances to a limited company formed for that purpose which converts a regulated mortgage into an unregulated product with loss of legal protection including that for minors."

I quote at length to prove to the Minister that these serious charges and allegations cover things that have been happening for 15 years, and nobody has been brought to book.

Will the Minister meet me and Martin Wickens to discuss these serious issues and to make sure they are rectified?

2.55 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to talk in this important, if somewhat depressing, debate. We have heard over and over again from hon. Members on both sides of the House that the FCA, the ombudsman and the banks have been found wanting, so we must ask what possible redress our constituents can hope to have when those three bodies are found not to be up to the mark.

A number of cases in Brentwood and Ongar have been brought to my attention, but this afternoon I will just talk to the case of a couple I believe are with us in the Gallery. They took out a mortgage with Halifax, part of Lloyds Banking Group, in 2008. They were not in arrears at the time, but they sought to remortgage in 2013 because they could see things might be difficult down the line. Their request was refused. The couple subsequently did fall into arrears, and the bank sought to repossess their house, which caused them an enormous cost to their wellbeing and health. One can only imagine the stress people go through in such circumstances.

We know LBG is not spotless in this area. In April 2017, the ombudsman found against LBG in the case of a customer who had been stranded on a variable rate mortgage—people in that situation are called mortgage prisoners—and found this had left the borrower in "a worse position, having to pay a higher rate, which hasn't been in his best interests."

A couple of months later, in July 2017, the FCA issued a statement saying that LBG had agreed to set up a redress scheme for mortgage customers who had incurred fees after they fell behind with their mortgage payments:

"Following engagement with the Financial Conduct Authority ...Lloyds acknowledged that when customers fell into arrears, they did not always do enough to understand customers' circumstances to be confident that their arrears payment plans were affordable and sustainable."

Those two findings in 2017 should have given my constituents some succour and hope, but they had previously taken their case to the ombudsman and consequently found themselves with no adequate redress. Like many hon. Members here today, they subsequently saw the "Dispatches" programmes mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) in which it became clear the ombudsman may not have had quality of judgment in many cases. My constituents have grave uncertainty that they have been treated fairly.

We now find that the bank is disinclined to change its mind. We have reached an impasse. My office, the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking and finance and the family themselves have been round the houses. They have gone back to the bank, to the FCA and to the ombudsman, but there is no way through.

[Alex Burghart]

We are left in a frustrating position, and my constituents feel that vital information about their case is not being taken into account. Indeed, we can see no way in which it can be taken into account.

I would be grateful if the Minister considered my constituents' case as he looks again at the system. I am interested in the APPG's proposals for an affordable and accessible dispute resolution platform with the powers of a court. We must strive for fairness, and fairness requires honest redress and honest arbitration.

2.59 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) on securing the debate. In my last speech on this matter in this House, I referred to a farm in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell); the family live in my constituency. I remind the House that they paid back half a million pounds in capital and £535,000 in interest, including £62,000 just to leave the bank they were with and go to another bank. The bank had the audacity to charge £6 for a transfer fee on the £1.25 million balance. What bank was this? It was the bank I am with—the Danske bank in Northern Ireland, the most profitable company in Northern Ireland, with profits of £117 million in 2016 and of £145 million in 2017. Its chief executive has said:

“We are absolutely delighted to have retained top spot in the Belfast Telegraph's listing of the Top 100 companies in Northern Ireland”.

Would it not have been better had it been in the top 100 for customer care and looking after its customers? That is what we should have had, instead of it trying to make more dividends for its shareholders.

In the time I have available, I shall be speaking about Hubert and Marjorie Armstrong, who have also had a nightmare situation with Danske bank in relation to their property development business, Moorcroft Estates Ltd, which has sites at Glenburn Manor of some 44 units and Fashoda Street in east Belfast, with a plan to build some 47 apartments. On 7 May 2007, Danske advanced the company £1.25 million, which was matched by the business, which had been successfully trading for a decade. Danske subsequently took an additional charge of £300,000 on their family home.

This story is dreadful, and, as happens all too often, it involves health issues. The company was finally insolvent in May 2010. On the preliminary reading, Mr and Mrs Armstrong's personal efforts to pursue the matter with the FCA are interesting and resonate with much of what I have heard from right hon. and hon. Members in this Chamber today. Mr Armstrong's is a classic case of where the Financial Ombudsman Service should not be involved now or in the future. It shows why we believe the tribunal is the correct complementary solution, to run alongside the right expanded remit of the FOS. Those of us in the all-party group on the Connaught Income Fund have come across many episodes and examples of where the FCA has failed in its duty as a regulator. We have read of the actions, or indeed the inactions, of the Financial Services Authority and FCA, and the FCA board should hang their heads in shame. Past victims have been ignored.

I am conscious of the time and I am trying to race through this. I hope I am not talking too fast, Madam Deputy Speaker. If I am, I apologise to the *Hansard* people, who are probably writing furiously at this moment in time and trying to decipher my Ulster Scots. I wish to draw the attention of Members to early-day motion 1162, which we tabled to give Members the chance to record their concerns about how the cases of past victims have been looked at. The FCA board has asked:

“Do you agree that the changes introducing small businesses as eligible complainants should come into effect on 1 December 2018 and that they should apply only to complaints made to a firm regarding acts or omissions of the firm which occur from 1 December 2018?”

That approach is wrong. Let us get it right. I do believe in the tribunal system—I think this should be done—and I wish to conclude by mentioning an article by Richard Samuel on 5 February 2018 headed “Banking disputes: time for a tribunal”. In our view, he sets out compelling and convincing logic for why we should have both the FOS and tribunals. I urge the Minister to look towards that. As I always do, I look to him for a positive and helpful response. Hand on heart, I ask him to help our constituents.

3.3 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), although we usually do this in Westminster Hall, rather than here in the main Chamber. It is also a pleasure to be called in this debate and to congratulate the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) on securing it, as it gives many of us an opportunity to speak up for businesses that were so badly treated by their banks. At a time when these businesses needed support and a relationship that looked to the future, they instead found short-term attitudes being taken by their lender, offering them little, other than something they did not want or the opportunity to go bankrupt. It was pretty obvious what the outcome of those choices would be.

My involvement in this has been prompted by the case of Rew Hotels Ltd, which has a number of hotels in my constituency. The business is family owned, and they have been developing and running their service for many years.

Bob Stewart: Fawlt Towers!

Kevin Foster: Thankfully, a stay in a Rew hotel is nothing like Fawlt Towers, although I understand that Basil Fawlt might be about to leave the country following one of this week's votes.

I have only a short time, so will come back to what I was saying. Around 10 years ago, Rew Hotels was offered a hedge that it really did not want. Its bank at the time was Barclays. It was not a constructive discussion; it was basically a choice of the company either taking a hedge that it really did not want, that would cost it a large amount of money and that would not have any great benefit to the business, or trying to refinance multimillion-pound debt in the middle of a credit crunch. It was obvious what the choice was going to be. The company was saddled with it for several years, but in the end bought itself out. It is estimated that, all in, it lost around £850,000 in the process.

That £850,000 is not just a figure; as Tim Rew, whom the Minister has met, says, it is not just lost money but lost jobs, lost investment and lost opportunity. It is a

lost chance to develop new rooms and facilities, and other things to bring guests into Torbay. This is not just a debate about what a profit margin might or might not have been. Fundamentally, there is a feeling of injustice that a small company has had to work to produce that for a very large banking corporation that could have done a whole lot better in its attitude and support.

The Minister will know from his meeting with the Rews that their next frustration came with the methods of redress. One of the initial offers was for them to be given some compensation and, oh yes, to sign up for another hedge. They did not want a hedge in the first place, and now they had the chance to sign up for another. It was literally ridiculous.

The potential alternatives for smaller companies are difficult. Rew Hotels was caught by the fact that, because it is a hotel group and has large numbers of waiting staff and general hospitality staff, it was classed as a slightly more sophisticated investor. I could understand that argument if it was a solicitors company, with 50 or 60 solicitors and accountants and a small percentage of non-professional staff. This company, though, was clearly going to be limited in its capacity to make a professional investment decision, yet because it has a large number of employees, it was designated as though it was a great expert in the financial markets, which was clearly unfair.

I was interested to hear the suggestion in the speeches of my hon. Friends the Members for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) and for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) about looking into a more tribunal-based approach to dealing with some of these cases. Rew Hotels feels that the existing system is like the banks marking their own homework and deciding to give themselves an A, and then saying that even along with compensation a company should have what it does not want.

I have every confidence in the Minister, who I know has an understanding of tourism, given his previous role. I hope that he will consider carefully some of the arguments made in this debate and that we can give companies and those who have been victims a proper system of redress, other than costly legal action.

3.7 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), and I congratulate my friend, the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), on securing this important debate.

Let me start with what we all hope is a mythical three-headed beast that guards the gates to hell: Cerberus, the veritable hound of hell. However, this beast is not mythical, but one of the largest private equity firms in the world. Its interests include private armies and arms manufacturing; it structures itself in such a way that it pays virtually no tax; and it likes to go shopping in the UK for commercial loan books. In Scotland, it has purchased almost all of Clydesdale bank's commercial property loan book. Rather than run down its book as RBS's Global Restructuring Group did, Clydesdale took a more straightforward approach: it sold its book to henchmen to do the work for it. Let me be clear, these are not necessarily non-performing or toxic loans; they are just non-core to the Clydesdale.

Why does Cerberus like to shop here? It is quite simple, and a matter of interest to me as a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee:

commercial lending is unregulated and our insolvency system is one of the most creditor-friendly in the world. Firms can buy a loan book, scour the one-sided contracts for any technical breach and, even if a loan is being serviced, put the company into administration, sell the assets and, if there are personal guarantees involved, go for personal bankruptcy and the family home of the guarantors.

All that brings me to an illustration of the individual human toll of banking misconduct. Let me read some very poignant words that were sent to me by a constituent. This businessman's experience relates to Clydesdale bank, but we all know that we could substitute the name of almost any bank. He says:

"One very personal matter I can confide to you"

is that

"as a direct result of Clydesdale Bank's strategies, actions"

and

"correspondence, I had a nervous breakdown, coming very close to a life-threatening condition."

He goes on to say:

"Many business people would not admit to the shame of the impact that Clydesdale had on their life and that of their families. For that reason alone and not that of revenge or financial redress I would ask that this issue is brought out into the open for MP's to discuss the legacy left. It has been a very high cost in many ways."

Finally, he says:

"My business interests have survived just, but I can no longer play any part in developing the Scottish economy as a result of that period, and that is a high cost and a loss to the Scottish economy."

I am very grateful to him for giving me his brave testimony. It is truly shocking that an individual who only ever set out to generate an income and run a good business has been not only financially damaged, but stripped of his plans and his ambitions. His is just one story, one life ruined, but of course we know that it is replicated in every constituency across the country. What has our small business community done to be treated in this way? Surely it deserves better. It has never been more important for the British economy—

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the recent section 166 report into the Royal Bank of Scotland's misconduct was limited to only those cases from 2008 to 2013, which means that victims such as my constituent Mr Nigel Henderson, who was going through this from as early as the 1990s, does not have a voice?

Stephen Kerr: My hon. Friend makes her point, which I will repeat: surely these business people deserve better. It has never been more important for the British economy to support small businesses; they are the engine for growth. We need to draw a line in the sand, provide redress for those still suffering as a result of bank misconduct and put safeguards in place so that this cannot happen again. If we are to learn anything from the scandals that have plagued the commercial finance sector, it is that we must look at the way that we treat our businesses. That is why I support the motion today, and why I reiterate my support for a full public inquiry.

3.11 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I will not say that it is a pleasure to speak in this debate, because it is not. The stories that we have heard from across the

[Kirsty Blackman]

House today are absolutely harrowing. It is clear that each one of us represents constituents who have been affected by what RBS, GRG or one of the other banks have done in the pursuit of profit.

I must declare an interest: my cousin, her husband and their four children were one of the families who were affected by RBS and GRG. In fact, their business was put into the GRG and, as late as 2016, they were made homeless as a result of GRG repossessing the farm in which they lived, so a couple with four children were made homeless by GRG. I felt that it was important that I declared that as an interest.

One of my constituents, who I hope is in the Public Gallery today, has also been to see me in relation to his experiences with GRG. I will not say exactly what GRG did, because that has been widely covered by a number of Members this afternoon. His wife suffered a cardiac arrest as a result of the stress and subsequently died. We have also heard about people committing suicide as a result of what happened with GRG. One Conservative Member—I apologise, but I forget who—talked about the fact that companies jumped through all the hoops they were asked to jump through and yet were still relentlessly pursued for money that they were said to owe because of over-inflated interest rates. This was a relentless pursuit of profit. My constituent who approached me is very clear that there needs to be a public inquiry, and I absolutely agree with him.

This issue has destroyed lives. It is impossible to overestimate how hard it is to be a small business owner anyway. It is difficult to run a small and medium-sized business, particularly if a person has not run one before. It is also a lonely occupation. A person is there trying to run a business by themselves. They may never have done that before, and their bank is supposed to be there to support them; they are supposed to be there to provide them with finance to ensure that they can run a successful business. They are not supposed to pursue people for the assets that they want to gain for themselves.

We have not covered how much of a cabal this situation has involved. The reality is that a very small number of people were running GRG. In fact, some practices that have been raised with me involved these people trying to cover their own backs by encouraging one small business owner to take over the assets of another small business owner at a particularly low price, so that that person's balance book could look wrong. It is horrendous if those things happened, but they were able to happen because of the very small nature of such organisations and the fact that people were not able to talk about them because they were being told that they were in debt.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I, too, have had constituents affected by this, and I agree with many comments made throughout the debate. My hon. Friend is making the case for a public inquiry, otherwise it will fuel suspicions that there is an attempt to continue to keep this matter away from the public eye. She also highlights the fact that we are talking about the Global Restructuring Group. Does she agree that the Minister needs to tell us whether there is international exposure on the activities of the Royal Bank of Scotland—that is,

whether these practices were used in some of its overseas activities and whether it is liable for the results of any such behaviour?

Kirsty Blackman: This has not been widely covered in anything that has been published so far in relation to GRG. It would therefore be incumbent on any inquiry to take that into account.

The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) mentioned the issues with the section 166 report and what was initially published. He made an important point, and I echo his sentiments. For hon. Members who have not read the report, it makes for devastating reading and is worth looking at.

The reality is that the redress scheme is not good enough. For a start, it does not have enough money to compensate victims adequately for what has happened to them. RBS will never be able to afford to fund all the claims being made by small or medium-sized businesses. As the redress scheme is run by the bank itself, it is fairly easy for the bank just to pay out to the victims, where the bank now has majority ownership and is therefore one of the main creditors. If there is not adequate external scrutiny, such situations can arise without check.

GRG was in the wrong. Everybody in this House agrees that GRG was in the wrong. RBS agrees that GRG is in the wrong, which is why it has a redress scheme. It is clear that the time for talking has passed. All of us standing around here are clear that something needs to be done. This issue has united the House, which does not happen very often. It is in the power of the Government to take actual action and to create a real system with proper redress.

Joanna Cherry: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister needs to give us some tangible gains to take away to our constituents—including my constituents Mr and Mrs Neave—as a result of today's debate. We have been going around the houses for years now, as the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) said.

Kirsty Blackman: I absolutely agree. The time for talking about this is over. It is time for the Government to take action. It is time for action to ensure that all our constituents can claim the redress that they should and that all business practices that devastated people's lives are properly brought to light.

3.18 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): It has been a sobering experience to listen to this debate. We have heard so many stories and so much advocacy from hon. Members on behalf of constituents. I commend everyone who has spoken today. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) and the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking for securing this debate on a topic that continues to be of such critical importance.

In my remarks I want to restate the Opposition's support for a full public inquiry; talk a little about the current inadequacy of the regulator and the section 166 procedure; state why an independent mechanism of redress for business is clearly required; and say why this is in the best interests not just of customers and the country, but of the banks themselves.

This debate shows that the issues around the relationship between banks and their business customers are not fading, diminishing or going away. Rather, in recent weeks we have continued to hear yet more appalling revelations about the way in which RBS's Global Restructuring Group treated its customers and stories of how that had spread to other financial institutions, too. Following the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), we can now read the full section 166 report on the conduct of the GRG unit. The extent of the inexcusable behaviour revealed in that report is truly shocking. The purchase of the assets of distressed businesses, in some cases by RBS staff themselves, illustrates just how deeply the conflicts ran within GRG. Clearly, certain bank employees felt that they could act with total impunity towards their customers, and that cannot be acceptable.

We are all aware that the complaints process is ongoing between RBS and its former business customers who were the victims of GRG. However, I echo the call made by my hon. Friends the Members for Norwich South and for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) in the debate that took place earlier this year in saying that this issue demands a full, independent public inquiry. Given the revelations exposed in the section 166 report, there must be a comprehensive examination of whether criminal liability has occurred, and those responsible must be held to account. In addition, given that certain individuals involved in GRG's management continue to work in senior positions within British banking, surely an objective assessment should be made as to whether those people are fit to do so.

I am afraid that the Government's response on this has so far fallen short—for instance, in the Treasury's repeated cut-and-paste responses to the numerous parliamentary questions tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central since December 2017. The Treasury has simply deferred the issue time and again, saying that it is impossible to comment while the Financial Conduct Authority's investigation is ongoing. Will the Minister please acknowledge today the strength of feeling in all parts of the House?

Another key issue is the effectiveness of the existing system—in particular, the use of section 116 reports and whether that is entirely appropriate to deal with these cases. A section 116 report, or skilled person's report, is conducted by a third party appointed by the Financial Conduct Authority. The cost is met by the subject of the investigation, and it can range from hundreds of thousands of pounds to millions of pounds, but the reports remain entirely confidential. This lack of transparency is not good enough.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman mentioned executives from RBS who are still earning large amounts of money within the financial services sector. Is he aware that Nathan Bostock, a senior director within GRG, currently earns £1.6 million as chief executive of Santander and £1.8 million a year from RBS as part of his payoff?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. These are the questions that need answering. People have told me that they worked for RBS and left because they were unhappy with the conduct of the bank. Surely they should also be allowed to put their case in a proper way.

Returning to the confidentiality of section 166 reports, I have to put on record the disquiet, certainly among Opposition Members, about the discrepancy between the FCA's summary of the investigation into GRG and the actual report in terms of the former's heavily sanitised nature. Now that the report has finally been made public, we can fully witness the extent to which relationships with business customers were abused. Under normal conditions, however, the report would have remained confidential. That cannot be appropriate, because it furthers the perception that the odds are stacked against businesses. We need processes that are transparent and fair, and command the confidence of everybody. We also need to look at who is asked to undertake these reports and any conflicts of interest that they might have.

As many Members have pointed out, small businesses are the backbone of our economy. If they cannot trust the financial institutions that are meant to serve them, we are all going to pay the price for that. Statistics show that up to half of all SMEs are non-borrowers, although we do not know whether that is because they do not feel they can trust their banks or simply feel too anxious to expand by taking on credit. As a country, we all acknowledge that we need to offer those businesses the right incentives and support to grow. We need to solve this crisis of trust in business banking. An independent arbiter who can fill the gap between the Financial Ombudsman Service and the full legal route for redress is a minimum sensible starting point for consideration. We await with interest the outcome of UK Finance's independent review, chaired by Mr Simon Walker, of complaints handling and alternative dispute resolution for SMEs, which could provide a steer.

However, I do not believe that this industry can be allowed to self-regulate, and that is why an independent platform must be considered. Like many Members who have spoken today, I believe that the restoration of trust in business banking is essential, but it will not come without the Government taking decisive action. A public inquiry, redress for victims, accountability for those responsible and a new independent system of redress are surely the right places to begin.

3.24 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) on securing this debate and thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. I have listened carefully to more than 20 speeches and 30 contributions, and I would like to acknowledge the request from the hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) and my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) to address specific cases; I am happy to engage with them on that.

Considering the developments in the case of RBS Global Restructuring Group since our debate on 18 January, it is absolutely right that we revisit this important subject. As Members across the House have said, small and medium-sized businesses are the backbone of our economy—I grew up in one—and they depend on financial services providers for vital finance through lending, but those transactions must be in the strictest accordance with the law. Let me be clear: wherever that has not been the case, any business affected should be compensated.

[John Glen]

I have listened carefully to a whole range of stories from Members this afternoon about people who have clearly been badly let down. I had the privilege of meeting hoteliers in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) who were treated in an appalling fashion and given products that were clearly not suited to their needs. That has been replicated in very many cases. I have been moved by the numerous letters I have received from Members on behalf of their constituents, many of whom face significant difficulties as a consequence of their treatment by RBS GRG.

I want to reassure the House that the Government and the Financial Conduct Authority take this issue very seriously. I understand the frustration about the timing of resolution, and I want to address specifically what I have done as the Minister since January. In March I met Andrew Bailey, chief executive of the FCA, and stressed to him just how important I consider the proper and full resolution of the RBS GRG issue to be, which he agrees with. The skilled person report produced for the FCA stated that there were areas of widespread inappropriate treatment of firms by RBS. That is unacceptable.

I went on to meet the chief executive of RBS recently, to discuss the range of issues that were raised then and have been raised again today. Following that meeting, I was pleased to receive a letter from the chief executive addressing a number of the points that colleagues have raised today. RBS has committed to setting up an independent appeal process for consequential loss claims, addressing a gap that existed in the redress scheme, and it is discussing with Sir William Blackburne how that process will operate. RBS has also agreed to stand aside—rightly, in my opinion—from any money that might be returned to it from redress paid to liquidated companies and will donate that money to charities supporting small businesses. I welcome those important steps in improving the operation and transparency of the redress scheme for businesses affected by RBS GRG.

As Members will be aware, the Treasury Committee has published the FCA's full report on RBS GRG. The FCA is now conducting the second stage of its investigation, which is a more focused investigation into the matters arising from the report. It has moved on quickly, so that we can examine the issues more quickly than if we had gone through an alternative process. I have confidence in the FCA's approach and direction on this case. I am meeting Andrew Bailey regularly, and I hope that the FCA will conclude its investigation soon, by which I mean in the next eight to 12 weeks. As I mentioned in our debate on this topic in January, I do not wish to complicate the matter further or prejudice any outcomes while the FCA is investigating, but I am very clear that I expect it to conclude its investigations in a very short timeframe.

The FCA's independence is vital to its role; it was vital before 2010, and it is vital now. Its credibility, authority and value to consumers would be undermined if it were possible for the Government to intervene directly in its decision making.

I would like to turn now to the broader issue of alternative dispute resolution methods between SMEs and banks and to some of the issues around professional services that were raised in the debate.

Kirsty Blackman: Will the Minister commit to, if possible, putting the RBS letter in the Library, so that we can all see it? Will he also ensure that when the FCA does conclude the final part of the report, we can all see the full version as soon as possible?

John Glen: I am grateful for that intervention. I am happy to clarify that the letter has been copied to the chair of the APPG and the Chair of the Select Committee, and I will make it more widely available.

There are already a number of avenues for SMEs seeking a resolution when dealing with their bank. Our smallest businesses have the Financial Ombudsman Service. I am of course aware of the "Dispatches" programme, and I have met the chief executive. The FOS is reviewing its operations and addressing the matters raised.

Where there are widespread issues, the FCA can ensure, and has ensured, redress through industry-wide or firm-specific redress schemes. Of course, there is also the usual legal process open to business, although I know this can be a time-consuming and costly process.

Since the last debate, the FCA has published a consultation paper on expanding the remit of the Financial Ombudsman Service, which would widen eligibility to include a greater range of SMEs.

Joanna Cherry: On the point about legal redress, does the Minister not appreciate that a lot of our constituents have lost everything. If they are in Scotland, they might be lucky enough to still be eligible for legal aid, but many legal aid lawyers are not equipped to take on this sort of complex action, so this is a real David and Goliath situation. That is why we need the tribunal.

John Glen: I acknowledge the outstanding concerns of many people across the United Kingdom, and that is why I welcome the FCA's consultation. It is my belief that widening SME access to the FOS is the right thing to do.

Clive Efford: My constituents became involved in this not because they had an SME, but because they were trying to get a mortgage and were forced into this process. The mistake was made with the first loan that was given to them, but the ombudsman will not recognise that and look into it. What we need is more pressure on the ombudsman to listen to the consumer and not the banks.

John Glen: I listened very carefully to the case the hon. Gentleman outlined, and I recognise the challenges that the FOS has to face up to. That is why I welcome the FCA's investigations and the FOS's own investigation following the "Dispatches" programme.

It is important that the landscape for dispute resolution for SMEs does not discourage or inhibit the ability of banks and small businesses to resolve disputes between themselves in a satisfactory way, where possible. I therefore welcome the reviews being undertaken in this area by the APPG on fair business banking and finance—ably led by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) and the hon. Member for East Lothian—and by UK Finance, as well as the Treasury Committee's ongoing interest in this area. When the findings of these reviews are published, we will consider them carefully, along with the outcome of the FCA's current consultation.

In the interests of time, I will briefly conclude by summarising the Government's position. It is right that we wait for the conclusion on GRG of the FCA's investigation of the matters arising from its skilled persons report before determining what further actions need to be taken, and I reserve judgment on what they could be.

On dispute resolution more widely, we must acknowledge the existing avenues, including the work that is going on in terms of reviewing and enhancing the Financial Ombudsman Service's provision. The FCA is progressing its work looking at the relationship between SMEs and financial services providers, and the APPG and UK Finance are undertaking their reviews as well. In the light of all the work going on, and the imminent conclusion of it, it is important that I consider that before we take alternative routes.

Once again, I thank all Members on both sides of the House who have raised very important issues on behalf of their constituents. I remain engaged to find a solution—a solution that works for all of them.

3.34 pm

Martin Whitfield: I thank the Minister for his response, but I also want to thank the 18 Back Benchers on both sides of the House who have spoken with a single voice. We are concerned about our constituents, who have been let down by the banking system. At the moment, we are in a cul-de-sac of regulation and dispute resolution, and this is going nowhere.

I hear what the Minister said about awaiting the report. By my calculation, it will be out in August, by which time other reports will be available. May I book an August slot now, Madam Deputy Speaker, should we need to return? Let us hope we do not need to return to this, but our constituents are not going away and we, acting on their behalf, are not going away either. I look forward to having such a discussion in August, when we may have a more positive response about a public inquiry and an independent tribunal and about the responsibilities of other professionals connected to the banking service.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the public disclosure of the Section 166 report into the conduct of RBS Global Restructuring Group (GRG); is concerned about the fundamental difference of tone and emphasis between the summary produced by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) and the full report; believes this calls into question the strength and independence of the regulator; notes that the concerns raised in the debate on 18 January with regard to the financial services sector, which is not limited to RBS and its advisors, not only persist, but are amplified by the conclusions in the report; calls on HM Treasury to instruct the FCA to move on to phase 2 of the investigation into the root causes of the conduct of RBS GRG by a body independent to the FCA; and once again calls for an independent inquiry into the financial services sector and the associated industries that have allowed misconduct to thrive, and the establishment of an independent mechanism for redress for businesses.

Libyan-sponsored IRA Terrorism

[Relevant documents: Fourth Report of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, Session 2016–17, HM Government support for UK victims of IRA attacks that used Gaddafi-supplied Semtex and weapons, HC 49, and the Government response, HC 331; and correspondence between the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and the Minister of State for the Middle East, relating to the previous Committee's inquiry into HM Government support for UK victims of IRA attacks that used Gaddafi-supplied Semtex and weapons, reported to the House on 29 November 2017 and 9 May 2018.]

3.35 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to take steps to obtain the required international authority to use a proportion of the assets of the Libyan Government that were frozen in the UK to compensate the relatives of people murdered and injured as a result of Libyan-sponsored IRA terrorism and to fund community support programmes in areas affected by that terrorism.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this debate and all right hon. and hon. Members, and indeed the Minister, for attending a debate on a subject that should have been finalised and closed a long time ago.

During my time as Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, we had the opportunity of holding an inquiry into Her Majesty's Government's support for UK victims of IRA attacks that used Gaddafi-supplied Semtex and weapons. That was an opportunity not only to hear from the victims of those attacks and the families of those who, sadly and tragically, lost their lives, but to draw attention to a series of missed opportunities to secure compensation for those victims. Today, we call on the Government to make amends for the inaction of previous Governments by securing justice for those victims and their relatives.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does he agree that it is very timely given the Attorney General's statement earlier, which revealed—and it may be entirely justified—that a Libyan citizen who was wronged by this Government has received £500,000 in compensation?

Mr Robertson: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. As I get deeper into my speech, I will refer to other compensation awards, but the Government should certainly follow that guiding principle.

The role of the Libyan Government in bolstering the activities of the Provisional IRA should not be understated. When he appeared before the Select Committee, the former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Jack Straw, stated:

“In the 1980s and early 1990s, Libya was probably the most serious state sponsor of terrorism in the world.”

Those were very strong words. From the early 1970s through to the 1990s, the Gaddafi regime in Libya supplied arms, funding, training and explosives to the Provisional IRA, which is accepted by many to have both extended and worsened the troubles.

Through a series of shipments that took place in the mid-1980s, the regime supplied the Provisional IRA with up to 10 tonnes of Semtex, a highly powerful and

[*Mr Robertson*]

virtually undetectable plastic explosive. The Semtex supplied made possible a deadly bombing campaign from the late 1980s, resulting in a horrific loss of life across Northern Ireland and the mainland. These include the attacks in Enniskillen, where a bomb was detonated that killed 11 people during a Remembrance Sunday ceremony, the bombings in Warrington that resulted in the deaths of two children—Tim Parry and Johnathan Ball—and the attack at docklands in this city, where a bomb killed two people and injured about 100 more. This is to name just a few of the atrocities carried out by the Provisional IRA using the Libyan-supplied Semtex. It does not come close to illustrating the extent of the devastation caused. While that loss of life is a tragedy, those attacks also had far-reaching implications for those who were injured and for the families and loved ones of those who sadly lost their lives.

During our inquiry, many victims emphasised not only the physical effects of the attacks, but the emotional, psychological and financial difficulties caused. The testimonies of those victims have been highlighted in previous debates, but it would be valuable to the House to consider them once more, to illustrate the sheer loss, heartache and pain caused by those attacks.

Colin Parry, whose 12-year-old son, Tim, died following the Warrington bombings in 1993, told the Committee:

“Describing the final moments of your child’s life is beyond words...because, as a parent, there is no greater pain or loss than the death of your child.”

Suzanne Dodd’s father was the inspector on duty on the day of the Harrods bombing. She told the Committee that, on the day of the attack, she and her siblings had been waiting for their father to come home to put up the Christmas tree when their mother told them that there had been a bomb at Harrods and that their father would be late. It emerged that her father had been seriously injured. Her mother returned from hospital on Christmas eve, telling Suzanne and her siblings that her father had died.

The urgency of this issue is possibly best illustrated by Mrs Gemma Berezzag, whose husband was left blind, paralysed and brain damaged by the docklands bombing. For 20 years she cared for her husband’s complex needs on a daily basis. She sadly passed away in 2016, before any resolution could be found. I ask the Government: how many more individuals affected by those atrocities will not see justice in their lifetime? Those cases provide only a snapshot of the suffering caused by Libyan-sponsored IRA terrorism, and time is running out for many of the victims.

Losing any loved one through natural causes is bad enough. Losing someone through an accident is perhaps even more shocking, but how much worse must it be when that life has been deliberately taken through terrorism? Add to that grief the involvement of a foreign, rogue state, and the victims’ relatives and friends must suffer more than any of us could ever imagine.

The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee heard how victims have been repeatedly let down by successive Labour, Conservative and coalition Governments, owing to their failure adequately to pursue compensation on their behalf. At times, it seemed that during periods of improved relations the concerns of victims were secondary to other considerations. The Committee concluded that

there had been a series of missed opportunities to raise the issue of compensation, particularly during a period of deepening relations between the UK and Libya in the 2000s.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate on a sensitive and important issue. Has he any evidence that the current Government have intensified their efforts to obtain compensation from the Libyan Government for all those victims of IRA-sponsored terrorism not just in Northern Ireland but throughout the United Kingdom?

Mr Robertson: The hon. Lady is a valuable and active member of the Committee and she took part in the inquiry to which I refer. I will touch on the issue she raised in a moment because it is a very important point.

In the 2000s, compensation was secured for the families of the Lockerbie bombing victims, and in 2004 we had the first visit to Libya by a British Prime Minister for 60 years. That visit was accompanied by the announcement that Shell had signed an agreement worth up to £550 million for gas exploration rights off the coast of Libya, yet there was still no sign of compensation for these victims. For our inquiry, the extent to which the Government of the day were aware of the campaign to seek compensation is unclear. Nevertheless, I believe the UK Government missed a vital opportunity during this period of improved relations to act on behalf of IRA victims.

The situation is even more disheartening for victims when we look to the achievements of the US, French and German Governments in securing compensation for their citizens. Because of the French Government’s threat to veto the lifting of UN sanctions on Libya, Libya agreed to pay the French Government \$170 million in respect of the 170 people killed following the bombing of UTA flight 772 in 1989.

The Committee also examined the exclusion of the UK victims of Gaddafi-sponsored terrorism from the terms of the US-Libya claim settlement agreement in 2008 as another missed opportunity for UK victims. Although the then UK Government claimed they had made representations to the US for the victims’ inclusion, we received no evidence of the level at which they had been made and with what force. It was explained that the US was unable to include UK victims in the agreement for several legal reasons, including that neither international law nor US law allows the US to espouse the claims of foreign nationals. However, this was contested during Committee evidence sessions, when it was suggested that that was not a matter of law but rather a matter of US Government policy. My primary concern, however, is the actions of the UK Government and I do not believe that, on the two occasions I have outlined, enough was done to put forward the claims of victims.

As the Gaddafi regime crumbled in 2011, the UN imposed financial sanctions on several individuals and entities involved in or complicit in the commission of human rights abuses in Libya. In September 2017, it was established that £12 billion of assets from the Gaddafi regime remained frozen within the UK’s jurisdiction. Currently, the UN resolutions, and the EU regulation which enforces them in the UK, provide no option for the UK Government to use frozen Libyan assets for the purposes of compensation. Disappointingly, there is no evidence that the UK Government raised the issue of

compensation at the point when the assets were frozen. This is particularly frustrating, as there are precedents for the use of frozen assets to compensate victims. For example, \$225 million of former President Marcos's assets seized in Swiss bank accounts have provided reparations for victims of human rights abuses in the Philippines.

The Select Committee asked the Government to consider the use of frozen assets to compensate victims and to contribute towards community support. At the time, we were very disappointed by the Government's rejection of recommendations made, and a number of Members, including myself and the new Chairman of the Select Committee, have continued to engage with the Foreign Secretary on this issue. However, to date, the Government have unequivocally ruled out the use of these assets for compensation and the potential use of our veto at the UN Security Council for the purpose of securing compensation. Today, we ask that the Government take a fresh approach to this issue and explore all options available to acquire the international authority to use a proportion of the Libyan assets frozen in this country to compensate victims and to set up support projects in the communities affected.

I do, of course, recognise that there are victims of Gaddafi in Libya, as well as in the UK, and I emphasise that the assets I refer to are the assets of those involved in human rights abuses in Libya and not those of innocent Libyans. The funds seized and frozen in this jurisdiction and across others have a role to play in contributing to the rebuilding of Libyan society and in helping the people who have suffered there to rebuild their lives. However, there is still a responsibility to deal with the legacy of the Gaddafi Government and the pain and suffering caused in the UK. I believe we should pursue these funds to do so.

I am realistic and recognise that since the fall of the Gaddafi regime Libya has faced insecurity and political instability, which has hindered progress on a number of issues, including compensation. I welcome the fact that, when the Foreign Secretary visited Tripoli in May and August last year, he raised this issue with the Prime Minister. To reply to the intervention from the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), I understand that that is the extent of what happened, although the Minister may correct me on that. I hope that this issue will continue to feature in the discussions that the Government have with the Libyan Government. I ask the Government to pursue this Government-to-Government approach where possible, rather than viewing this as a matter for individuals to deal with themselves. They simply cannot do so. The continued perseverance of the victims and their families shows strength and resolve, but they should not have to pursue this very difficult issue alone, and I ask the Government for their support in that.

When conducting our inquiry, we were repeatedly told by Ministers that it was difficult to move this issue on because there was no functioning Government in Libya to deal with, and as soon as one were established, a more determined approach would be taken. However, that has not happened, and the relatives have suffered for too long. That is why, supported by many hon. Members, we are suggesting today that the Government assess the origin of the frozen assets to determine how much of them were effectively lodged by the then Libyan

Government, as opposed to being investments made by private individuals. We suggest that the Government then seek international permission to use those assets to compensate the victims of Libyan-sponsored IRA terrorism, to compensate their relatives and to support the communities where the attacks took place.

In the Prime Minister's address to the Conservative party conference last October, she said that one of her main motivations in politics was to try to "root out injustice", yet this example of a major injustice remains and rages. Now is the time to act.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

Order. Colleagues will be aware that we have quite a short time for this debate. If they can stick to six minutes, I will not have to impose a time limit, but I will do so if we cannot get enough Members in.

3.52 pm

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) for his work on this issue not just as the previous Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, but since then. I also thank him and the Backbench Business Committee for securing the debate, and I pay tribute to all the Members here who have put in a lot of work over a number of years on this issue. This issue is not party political; it is about justice, and the situation has gone on for far, far too long.

I am afraid that when I listened to the evidence as a member of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, it was absolutely apparent that something, somewhere—at the back of all this within Government—was stopping Governments of all persuasions from pushing to get compensation and from pushing the United Nations to change the way in which the frozen assets could be dealt with. It is tragic—the hon. Gentleman has outlined a number of cases—and we could go through all the evidence. I urge anyone listening or watching who wants to understand the issue more to read some of the evidence that was given to the Select Committee.

I want to add a bit more about one person—one of the victims—who has already been referred to and who submitted evidence to our Committee: Mrs Gemma Berezzag. She had cared for her husband, Zaoui, who was left severely disabled. What she said to us was particularly poignant, because we know—the family are quite happy for this to be public—that she committed suicide in 2016. Just months before, she had told the *Belfast News Letter*:

"We never had a nice day in our lives since. My husband was a hard worker, nice to his children and nice to me. Now I change his nappy 10 times a day. Can your friends do this? I need financial help for my husband. I cannot even afford the nappies he needs. The Government forgot about me. I am 57 but I feel like I am 80. This is still killing me, 20 years after the bomb."

She and other people described going to the Foreign Office—they included people who had experienced the London docklands bombing, to which I know my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) will refer—to seek help. They even found someone who could speak Arabic. Time after time, they were told, "This is a private matter between you and the Libyan Government." Now, all these years later, we have a new relationship with the Libyan Government,

[Kate Hoey]

and the Minister has just been there. I hope he will tell us very clearly what he said and what was said to him, because, on the basis of all the evidence, I do not believe that enough has been done.

I do not accept what has been said about the frozen assets. One of the criteria in the EU regulation is “humanitarian”. If the person whose case I have just presented—and some of the other people who are suffering now, and who are getting older and older—cannot be helped on humanitarian grounds, I really do not know what “humanitarian grounds” can mean. I hope that in a year or so, if we are no longer in the EU, we may be able to change that regulation so that those people can be helped.

It seems that the push that should have come has never come. Let me give a prime example. In 2013, the G8 came to Enniskillen in Northern Ireland, the site of one of the biggest and most appalling bombings, which happened on Remembrance Sunday. The victims—and some of the relatives of the people who died in Enniskillen are in the Public Gallery—had not been told that the Libyan Prime Minister was coming. They heard about it because they managed to find something out on the internet. They then asked if they could meet Zeidan—the Prime Minister—because they thought that that would be very helpful: here was someone who was against Gaddafi as well. They were refused that visit, but were told, “Don’t worry; he is meeting the leaders in Northern Ireland.” And who should one of those leaders in Northern Ireland be but Martin McGuinness, who probably knew all about how the Semtex had come from Libya. So all those opportunities were not given to them.

I say to the Minister, “You now have an opportunity.” The Labour Government and Tony Blair did absolutely nothing. He would not come and give evidence to the Committee. He gave evidence about the “on the runs” issue, but not about this issue. We believe that there is a lot more to come out about what went on during that time and that it was not in the interests of Blair and the Government to do anything that would upset Gaddafi. Then came Gordon Brown, who actually set up a new unit in the Foreign Office to help the victims.

Lady Hermon: I am very pleased to be working with the hon. Lady on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. Does she agree that when the British Government, quite rightly, condemn terrorism unreservedly—and we have experienced far too much terrorism in the United Kingdom—they have a moral obligation to seek compensation for all the victims from the Libyan Government, to whom they now refer as a friend?

Kate Hoey: I absolutely agree. This is indeed a moral issue. I know that people will not like my saying this, but it sometimes seems to me almost as though there are two types of terrorism. There is terrorism, and then there is IRA terrorism. We now have to be so careful not to upset those who were once the leaders of what was the IRA. I really do think that the Government must show that terrorism is terrorism, wherever it happens.

We should not let the IRA off the hook on this. Yes, it was Libyan Semtex that was given to the IRA, but it was not Gaddafi who actually planted the bombs in Enniskillen and all those other places. I think it is very important to remember that.

I know that a number of other Members want to speak. Let me end by saying that this has gone on for far too long. There is £9.5 billion sitting in our banks, and if we and the United Kingdom Government cannot find a way to ensure that some of that money goes to those people who are, as we speak, ill and literally beginning to die off, I think that that is a shame on all of us here, and a shame on the Government. I hope that the Minister will respond in a positive way, because we have to move quickly on this issue.

3.59 pm

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) on securing it. I was fortunate enough to persuade the Backbench Business Committee to grant a Westminster Hall debate on this matter in my name in September 2016. There have been developments since then, although I would not quite say that there has been progress. I want to focus on what has happened recently, which I believe means that the matter is even more pressing.

There is background to why I take such an interest in this matter. A constituent of mine, Charles Arbuthnot, is one of the campaigners; his sister was a 22-year-old WPC killed in the Harrods bombing in 1983. When I first heard about that, I wanted to help as a constituency MP, but the following really struck me about that case, and it is at the core of the matter. I found out—as finally admitted in correspondence to me from the Foreign Office—that a United States citizen who was one of the victims of that Harrods bombing was compensated to the tune of several million pounds by the Libyan Government, yet UK victims have to date received not a penny.

Indeed, I do not comment in any way on the following case and whether the money is justified, but I am bound to say that we heard today from the Attorney General that in the case of Belhaj and Boudchar, two Libyan citizens whom we failed as a country—they suffered harm as a result of the actions of this state—the wife, Fatima Boudchar, will receive £500,000 in compensation. We must look at that and ask how our own victims of Libyan-sponsored terrorism would feel about that. I hope we will get an answer to that from the Minister.

I want now to look at some of the things that keep moving this issue forward. With a group of MPs and Lord Empey, I went to see the Foreign Secretary in October last year, and he promised us in a letter by return that he would be “more visibly proactive” in standing up for victims. I know the Minister is supportive and wants to see progress on this, so my key question to him is what does “more visibly proactive” mean? Does that mean more engagement with the Libyan Government? We know there is great difficulty in terms of the credibility of that Government and the lack of firm government in Libya. Does “more visibly proactive” mean we will get more regular updates, and more discussion between our Government and the Libyans? That is what I want to know: what exactly does that phrase mean in terms of coalface action?

The other point concerns the issue of assets, as set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury. It is hard to ignore the fact that billions of pounds of Libyan money is held in this very city. One of the great features of this country is the reliability of our legal system,

and I understand why the Government would be reluctant to look at this issue and in any way undermine the reputation of the City by appearing to be weaker in terms of security to those who might want to put their money here. However, we must also recognise that that Libyan money is frozen under UN mandate, and there will have to be a vote in the UN Security Council for those assets to be unfrozen. That would be at the request of Libya once there is a stable Administration, and they would be asking us, in effect, to vote in the UN Security Council to unfreeze those assets. We have already heard from my hon. Friend how the French threatened to use their veto to favour their victims of Libyan terrorism, and it astonishes me that we would not consider at all in any sense using that veto.

In fact in that same letter from the Foreign Secretary, he said:

“At our meeting, we discussed the feasibility of the UK using its veto in the UN Security Council, when the time comes, to prevent the unfreezing of assets until the Libyans had agreed to pay compensation to UK victims. While I sympathise with the intention behind this approach, I need to explain that I believe it highly unlikely that any Foreign Secretary would wish to do this.”

I would like to think that he is not “any Foreign Secretary”; he is a Foreign Secretary who believes in standing up for Britain, and who says he will be “more visibly proactive”, and I would like to think that, “when the time comes”, there will be discussions about that possible procedure.

Lord Empey is bringing forward a Bill again. I sponsored it when it came to the Commons last time; the Government objected and it fell. We must give that Bill at least a chance to be debated in this Chamber.

I want to finish with a really important development in the United States. This concerns a piece of legislation I referred to in the Westminster Hall debate: the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act. It was vetoed by President Obama, as I was informed in that very debate, but I can tell the House that Congress overrode that and it is now an Act in America. In March 2017, 1,500 injured survivors and 850 family members of 9/11 victims filed a class action lawsuit against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. We have, then, a situation where a Libyan citizen is to receive compensation for what they experienced at the hands of the UK Government, while we know that an American citizen received compensation following the Harrods bombing and that the United States is empowering its citizens to take action against state sponsors. We have to ask ourselves what the British Government are doing for British citizens slain on British soil by a terrorist organisation that was aided and abetted by a brutal regime. The scales of justice have yet to weigh in their favour.

4.5 pm

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): I start by thanking the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) for securing this important and timely debate. He has campaigned on this issue for years, as we know, and I pay tribute to him for bringing the motion to the Floor of the House.

I have been a member of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee since 2004, so I know all too well the seriousness of the issue that is the subject of the motion, which I am happy to support. Parliament must never forget the victims of violence during a 30-year conflict

that claimed the lives of some 3,600 people and left many more men and women injured and maimed, with their families suffering, too. Call it an insurrection, call it a civil war—call it what we want—but the troubles endured for so long in that corner of the United Kingdom, that corner of Ireland, and were so dreadful, spilling over into Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland and other countries, that the suffering continues today, and it would be irresponsible to shut our eyes and ears and turn our backs on those living with the legacy of that era.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend, I fully support the efforts of the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) and others on this matter. Does he agree that when we are discussing the past we need to be sensitive, measured and factual, but that the Prime Minister's comments yesterday upset many victims by inaccurately suggesting that the only legacy cases being investigated were those involving the armed forces and that wrongdoing by the armed forces could be overlooked? Facts and justice dictate otherwise. All victims are entitled to both.

Mr Hepburn: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I will cover some of that later.

I wholeheartedly endorse supporting victims, whatever their community, whatever their background, and that includes adequate compensation so that their lives might be improved and we do not add poverty to the physical and mental burdens that so many bear with determination and great fortitude. To be forced to sell your house to fund care does not just add insult to injury but is officialdom showing it does not care, which adds cruel contempt to injury. Those deserving proper compensation include victims of Libyan-sponsored violence—folk who had their futures torn apart by guns and bombs flowing from Colonel Gaddafi's regime in Tripoli.

The previous Northern Ireland Secretary was wrong to brush off good people with a cause telling them it was a private matter. No, it's not; it is a matter for this Government and this Parliament. Nobody is pretending that extracting reparations from a Libya falling apart will be easy, but it would cost the Government relatively little to throw their weight behind the campaign for justice, to fund victims now, and then to use the Foreign Office to try and force Libya to settle a debt of honour.

That said, I want no hierarchy of victimhood: special compensation for some but little or nothing for others. I want every victim looked after. In Northern Ireland, I have heard people blame Libya for weapons used, and others cite South Africa in the era of white rule and apartheid. Both have a case. Most, however, do not know the national source of the armaments that changed their lives forever, and they too are entitled to ask why the Government have abandoned them.

Back in the day, many of the settlements were pitiful, the maimed and traumatised being forced to accept insultingly small compensation that today leaves them on the breadline. Quite frankly, it is a disgrace, and I for one am delighted that they refuse to be out of sight, out of mind, and it is heartening to hear people today loudly take up the challenge to win them the justice so far denied to them. The more noise we make, and the louder we argue their case, the more likely we are to shame the Government into doing what is right. I suspect that, privately, the Minister who is here today knows that.

[Mr Hepburn]

This is not a party political battle. It is not even a question of right and left in politics. It is a matter of right and wrong. Northern Ireland has been through a lot, and the future is brighter than the past, but regrettably the scandal of inadequate compensation is a stain that we still need to wipe clean. This is a fight for justice and, along with my colleagues, I pledge my support for that cause.

4.10 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Jarrow (Mr Hepburn) and I agree with every word that he has uttered this afternoon. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) on getting this debate on to the Floor of the House at last. It is time that this long outstanding matter was given the full attention of Parliament, and I hope that our deliberations today will prompt Her Majesty's Government to take the action that I believe is long overdue to ensure that all victims of IRA and INLA terrorism sponsored by the former Libyan regime are fully compensated for their loss and suffering.

I am sad to say that IRA terrorism, supported by Colonel Gaddafi's regime, is the most significant example in recent times of British citizens being failed by their own Government when seeking justice for crimes committed against them. I believe that it is the paramount duty of Her Majesty's Government to use their power to act to resolve this issue either by making provision for the seizing of the assets of the Gaddafi family in London or by awarding compensation now and fighting for the money to be reclaimed for the UK Government later. It is not an option for our Government simply to expect the individuals and families affected to seek justice directly from the Libyan Government on their own. When it comes to state-sponsored acts of terrorism, it is surely right that the responsibility to represent the victims should be carried by the United Kingdom Government, whose duty must always be to defend the rights of British subjects.

As chairman of the parliamentary support group established to help the victims of Libyan-sponsored IRA terrorism, I am pleased to have worked on a cross-party basis alongside many colleagues who are here in the Chamber today to champion the just cause of obtaining compensation for the victims of these dreadful crimes, which they rightly deserve. We all lived through IRA bombings in the 1970s, '80s and '90s in London, Belfast and other towns and cities throughout Britain and Northern Ireland, carried out with explosives used by the Libyan regime, yet so many years later, the victims have still not received the fair compensation that they rightly deserve.

As we have heard today, some of victims and families who have suffered this trauma are elderly or have passed away, and others might not have much longer to live, yet their justified claims have not been dealt with. As a result of these appalling and devastating events, which caused unimaginable damage and suffering, countless people died leaving widows and children behind or were left severely disabled and with life-changing injuries, yet nothing has happened to solve this issue. That is wholly wrong, and the Government really need to act.

I ask the Minister: how can it be justified that some victims have received compensation while others have not? We have heard that other countries, such as the United States of America, Germany and France, have fought for their citizens and got the compensation that our successive Governments have failed to obtain. How can this not be settled while the victims and their families are still alive? It has to be sorted out soon. It is truly terrible that British victims have been treated so differently from American victims. Their Government stood by their victims, but our Government failed to stand by ours. That cannot be right. This approach of indifference must not carry on. It remains a fact that victims who happened to have an American, French or German passport were comforted by the fact their Governments had negotiated a compensation settlement on their behalf, yet British victims still have nothing.

Each time the issue of compensation for these deserving victims is raised, we have until now received the same empty response from successive Governments. Each time, we hear weak excuses for not pursuing a way of bringing this matter to a satisfactory conclusion for the British victims of terrorism. Each time, the long-hurting victims of the IRA and of Gaddafi's regime listen in, only to be let down and left to wait indefinitely.

Time is running out, and successive Governments have both missed and avoided opportunities to bring justice to the victims. This cannot be allowed to happen one moment longer. To settle this now, our Government should at least consider a compensation scheme to be paid now, with the money claimed back from Libyan assets in due course, otherwise many victims face the prospect of never being compensated.

The former Gaddafi regime has £9.5 billion-worth of frozen assets in our capital alone. If not now, in the future a percentage of those assets should be used to compensate the victims. Let the British Government take the lead. They have the power to do so. Her Majesty's Government must act decisively against the perpetrators and backers of these horrific crimes and deliver justice for all those whose lives were so cruelly cut short or who suffered injury or loss. The powers lie here, and we must give hope to all British citizens who have suffered at the hands of terrorism.

I truly hope it is not too late, otherwise the consequence of this missed opportunity to secure compensation will be a stain on our nation. Now is the time to correct past failures, to hold the enablers of terrorism to account and, once and for all, to right this wrong by giving the victims the justice and compensation they deserve.

4.16 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a brief contribution to this debate. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), who has been so strong in his support for this campaign over so many years.

I am reassured to see the Minister in his place. He commands great respect on both sides of the House. He has heard numerous speakers say that he does not face a very high bar. We need a champion in the House, and many of us hope he will be able to deliver because we know he is supportive of the cause, to which he is sympathetic.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) on leading the bid to secure this debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for affording the time.

The South Quay bomb in 1996, near Canary Wharf in my constituency, signalled the end of the IRA ceasefire that had briefly prevailed. Two men died and 50 other people were injured. Hundreds of buildings were damaged or destroyed, many businesses were negatively affected and many, many people were made temporarily homeless.

I pay tribute to Jonathan Ganesh, who was badly injured in the blast. He set up and has been the driving force behind the Docklands Victims Association, which campaigns for redress for victims and their families. Inam Bashir and John Jeffries died, and some of the survivors had life-changing injuries—brain damage, blindness and paralysis—and are still awaiting appropriate compensation. Some, as has been mentioned, have died. We heard moving testimonies from my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) and from the hon. Member for Tewkesbury.

The noble Lord Empey first introduced the Asset Freezing (Compensation) Bill in the other place in 2016. The Bill has since been passed by the Lords, and the hon. Member for Romford is now pushing for it to have a hearing in this House. Billions of pounds of Libyan assets have been frozen and gathering interest in UK bank accounts for years. I submitted a parliamentary question asking how much is frozen and how much interest has accrued and—this contradicts the hon. Member for Romford, with no disrespect—the Economic Secretary to the Treasury told me in February 2018:

“In 2011, the approximate aggregate value at the time the funds were frozen in the UK was £7.5 billion.

The current value of frozen assets held are in the process of being finalised as part of the ‘2017 Annual Frozen Fund Review’. However, at the close of business on 30 September 2016 they were approximately £11.7 billion.”

So we are talking about £7.5 billion in 2011 and £11.7 billion in 2016, with the funds having almost doubled in that period. Many of us do not accept the Government’s contention that these funds cannot be accessed. As we have heard, in the USA, following the Libyan Claims Resolution Act in 2008, US victims of Libyan-sponsored terrorism were paid substantial compensation. So the questions are, and have been for some time: can the funds be used, can the interest be used and what discussions have been taking place with the Libyan authorities? Although we all recognise the absence of a formal Government structure with which to deal, if discussions have been taking place, it would be good to know exactly where we are with those.

The second route we have been pressing, in the absence of legal access to the interest and frozen assets—and I understand that the Government have to recognise this—is at the UN, as outlined by the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge). At some point, the decision to unfreeze Libyan assets in various countries has to be taken and it has to be decided by a resolution of the UN. A number of us have been calling for the UK to threaten to use our veto on the Security Council against the release of these funds. I would be grateful if the Minister responded on that proposal to say why the Foreign and Commonwealth Office seems so set against it. Given the billions at stake, it might be thought to be

in Libya’s interests to afford a small percentage of those assets to secure the bulk of the money it needs so badly to restructure the country.

This campaign has gone on for far too long. It is time for the UK Government to step up and conclude this sorry saga, whether by domestic decision, accessing frozen assets or diplomatic pressure. The victims deserve better.

4.21 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): In 1999, “Bandit Country: The IRA & South Armagh” a book by Tony Harnden, outlined in some detail the links between Libya and the Provisional IRA. The Provisional IRA’s campaign was given huge stimulus by the series of vessels full of weapons that arrived in places such as County Wicklow from the mid-1980s onwards. We are talking about missiles, ammunition and explosives. We make a mistake if we think it was just explosives, because people were killed by Kalashnikovs, rocket-propelled grenades and so on; they were killed by Libyan-inspired weapons. I wish to outline one shipment, to give colleagues an idea of what was coming in.

In about October 1986, a deal was arranged between Thomas “Slab” Murphy of the Provisional IRA, who is pretty well known to people like me, and Nasser Ali Ashour, a Libyan intelligence officer and diplomat. It took about 30 Libyan soldiers two nights to load up a converted Swedish oil rig replenishment ship called the Villa. Some 80 tonnes of weapons and explosives were put about the Villa, including seven RPGs, 10 surface-to-air missiles, a huge number of Kalashnikovs and one tonne of Semtex H, which is an incredibly powerful plastic explosive. It is far more powerful than the normal fertiliser-based bombs used up until that time. The Villa slipped through international waters and landed at Clogga Strand in County Wicklow. From there, its load was spirited away to long-term hides and then secretly distributed to Provisional IRA active service cells for use to kill indiscriminately.

It is indisputable that the Gaddafi regime—let us not say Libyans—supplied weapons and explosives used by the Provisional IRA. It is indisputable that so many innocent people died as a result of Provisional IRA activity using Libyan-supplied arms and explosives. It is indisputable that other nations have ensured compensation for victims of Libyan-backed terrorism. It is indisputable that huge sums of Libyan cash are frozen in London’s banks—we have just heard that there is nearly £12 billion of it. Surely the Government can find a mechanism that can compensate victims, perhaps in advance for those who are getting older, sometimes living in agony or in poverty. Get some money to them!

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech. I was not even aware of the figures cited by the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). Do those figures not suggest that when the request is made, we could return the assets to Libya with some kind of indexing so that it got the full value of its assets, and there would still be billions left with which it could pay recompense?

Bob Stewart: They do indeed—my hon. Friend is so right. We could use just a little of the interest. That is all it would take: just a little of the interest to compensate our citizens for this criminal terrorist activity. I am quite

[*Bob Stewart*]

sure that decent, honourable Libyan citizens would want that to happen. The Government have a duty to do something about this.

4.26 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart); he injects into these debates a level of knowledge from his years of service in uniform that, in all honesty, I do not believe anyone else could. I thank the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) for securing the debate.

There is a sense of *déjà vu* about this debate, but that is not what it should be. It is my desire that this debate will be something completely different and that it will bring about action. That has been the thrust of what all Members have said in their speeches and interventions. I want this debate to result in a change of direction and decision, not simply in platitudes and sympathetic consideration.

It is my belief that the duty that we have to our citizens supersedes the duty that we have to others. It is important that we all stand together today against the tactics of terror that cost lives and resulted in so many innocent people having to endure life-changing injuries. The Democratic Unionist party stands shoulder to shoulder with the innocent victims of terrorism who are making their case for proper recognition and support.

I am sure that other Members have been sent a letter by a very worthy and notable police officer; I presume from some of the contributions that that is the case. He was severely injured in the 1983 Harrods bombing that was carried out by the IRA. To that brave man who has carried on serving Queen and country, through physical difficulty and emotional and mental torment, I say: we salute you. I thank him for his service. I have heard what he said in the letter that I received and that I suspect others received, and I agree with and appreciate every single word that he has shared. He epitomises the suffering of victims.

One of the most startling parts of the police officer's letter was his recollection of seeing an American gentleman—I think the hon. Member for Tewkesbury referred to this earlier—being injured and then attended to after the explosion. This police officer has looked on as the American Government ensured that there has been a form of justice for that man. They saw the part played by Gaddafi and his minions and decided that there was a price to pay, and they paid that price to their citizens.

This debate is epitomised by the fact that two people who were seriously injured in the same IRA Semtex bomb explosion in the capital city of this United Kingdom are treated in such different ways. Why would any rational person deem it acceptable that an American victim is compensated by the Libyans, but the British victims of this atrocity are not? It is little wonder that this brave police officer and so many other innocent victims feel abandoned, worth less than the American tourist who happened to be visiting their city.

This British police officer ran towards the danger—towards the bomb—yet that duty and sacrifice have not been properly acknowledged by a Government who I say with respect have failed adequately to make the case to the Libyan Administration. Along with others in this

House, I pledge that I will seek justice for that police officer, his family, friends and colleagues, and for the innocent victims throughout this nation and this entire United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Lady Hermon: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene.

Reflecting on the close working relationship between the Conservative Government and his party, the Democratic Unionist party, I have assumed that this very sensitive and very important issue for victims of Libyan-sponsored IRA terrorism has been raised in discussions by him and his colleagues with either the Foreign Secretary or indeed the Prime Minister. It would be very helpful if he assured us that that in fact is the case.

Jim Shannon: I am quite happy to assure the House that the matter has been raised at the highest level with the Prime Minister. Everyone can be assured that we are not behind the door when it comes to pushing this matter and when it comes to talking to the Minister. For the victims, families, friends and colleagues across the whole United Kingdom, this is something that has been said before, but it needs to be reiterated, “You are the victims and you deserve the best that we can give.” Government at the very highest level and all of us must do better for the innocent victims of terrorism.

I asked the Home Secretary at the end of March whether she would raise the matter of the unexplained wealth orders in respect of the members of the Gaddafi family and their Libyan associates who reside in the UK, or who claim ownership of the frozen assets in the UK. The response was not particularly helpful, so I think it is time that the Minister talked to the National Crime Agency, the Crown Prosecution Service and the Serious Fraud Office about finding some methodology on how to retrieve the £9.8 billion.

I say to the Minister, on behalf of every person affected by the evil deeds of evil men, aided and facilitated by Gaddafi and Libya, to make the change today and to step up for his constituents, for my constituents, for the people of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and simply for the concept of justice and for no other reason than what is right.

Albert Einstein made many statements, and I will quote one today. He said:

“The world is a dangerous place to live; not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don't do anything about it.”

I say to the Minister that I hope that will not be the case for this Government. It is the wish of our people that we do something about this matter. Government after Government have sat and felt sympathy for victims. Northern Ireland MP after Northern Ireland MP has been infuriated by the lack of movement, as have our colleagues in Great Britain. This issue will be raised again and again and again until every victim of Libyan-sponsored terrorism knows without doubt that this institution, this Parliament and this Government have done all they can to ensure that the men who were blown up, side by side, have parity of treatment from their separate Governments.

I am very conscious of time so let me just say that these people deserve our sympathy, our tears, our time and our promise to act. Their need dictates that we do no less; every fibre of our being should dictate that we

do no less; and our position certainly dictates that we as a Parliament do no less. Wrong was done. We cannot give back lives, mental health or physical wellbeing, but we must do what we can and what we have not done thus far. It is our duty to fight against evil and fight for the victims in this way. Minister, I look to you.

4.32 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I know that we want to hear from the Minister, so I will be as brief as I can be. I congratulate the hon. Members for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) and for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing this debate, especially after the Westminster Hall debate in December 2017. Once again we have heard a range of very powerful contributions by Members who have constituents directly affected by this. What we have heard from all of them is that we are dealing with a question of justice and that there is a very real danger that justice delayed will become justice denied.

The Gaddafi regime at the time accepted that it shared some responsibility for the damage caused to so many lives by the IRA bombings. As we have heard, those affected from other countries have been able to secure compensation, but repeated delays by successive UK Governments have meant that the families and victims, maimed and devastated, are still waiting. That is despite the fact that a range of options has been put forward over the years. The proposal in today's motion and in the Bill that has been promoted by Lord Empey and is now being introduced in this House provide a solution. If the Government are not willing to accept that, they should explain clearly why and put forward a viable alternative.

We have to hope that any decision made on the matter of compensation for victims is undertaken with the utmost sensitivity and with respect to the privacy and dignity of the victims' families. I pay tribute to the campaigners, some of whom we have heard about and some of whom I have received correspondence from—as all Members have. They all point out how time is passing. It is 20 years since the Good Friday agreement, and 10 years since the US Libyan Claims Resolution Act 2008. How long do these families have to wait for a resolution? If the UK Government fail to act on behalf of their citizens where it is possible to do so, they will have done an enormous and shameful disservice to the legacy of the victims of those terrorist acts. We heard from the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) that these acts do provide humanitarian grounds for the Government to take action.

There is a range of different proposals and options available to the Government. Of course we have to respect that the situation in Libya is difficult and that there are diplomatic and legal processes that have to happen. As I said in Westminster Hall, we probably have to reflect on the Government's role in the current situation in Libya. The fact is that they have spent considerably more money bombing Libya than they have ever done on trying to rebuild the country and bring about a stable settlement that would allow for negotiations to take place. But the idea that the families themselves should negotiate directly with the Libyan authorities is pretty concerning. It is difficult enough for the Government to do so, and these families are entitled to representation from their own Government. I am very keen to hear the

Government's response to the proposed Bill and to other suggestions. If they do not take those ideas, what opportunities do they see? Why do they think that families should otherwise be left to fend for themselves?

We have heard the Government say that they have to consider what support they need to offer victims of other terrorist attacks. I am in complete agreement with that. In fact, I led an Adjournment debate in this House on Foreign and Commonwealth Office support for victims of terrorism overseas. I have been visited by constituents who were caught up in Stockholm and in Tunisia. They were looking for basic and simple support from the Government, but found the Government lacking.

As part of my work with those people, I visited the Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Peace Centre in Warrington, which was set up in the memory of two young victims of the IRA bombing. It was one of the most moving experiences I have had as a Member of Parliament. The centre does fantastic work with victims of terrorist attacks—wherever those attacks happened and whatever the cause—and in bringing about reconciliation. Those support services should be extended to everyone who has fallen victim to a terrorist attack of some shape or form. And there will only be more. In a sense, all of us who were present in this Chamber last year were witnesses to terror visited upon Westminster.

The question of compensation is obviously more complicated, but in this instance there are clear opportunities and proposals to provide compensation, which has been awarded in other countries because of the efforts of those Governments. Now is the time for the Government to act. We have had a Select Committee report and a Westminster Hall debate. Today, we are having a debate on the Floor of the House, in which we have heard powerful testimonies from Members. Surely it is time for the Government to listen, to take action and, as all of us have said, to ensure that these victims get the justice they deserve.

4.37 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) on securing this debate. I also thank every Member who has contributed with such knowledge and such sympathy for the victims of IRA bombings, especially those bombings that were supplied by explosives from Libya. This afternoon, we have heard many tragic and moving cases of victims who have still received no compensation, while they look around them and see other countries that have managed to obtain compensation for the victims of terror instigated by the Libyan regime under Colonel Gaddafi.

The hon. Member for Tewkesbury called on the Government to compensate victims now. He referred to similar cases and the role of the Libyan Government in the IRA terror campaign and quoted the comments of the former Labour Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, on Libyan-sponsored terror. My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) said quite clearly and accurately that this is not a party political issue, but it is one of justice. She told the House of a harrowing case. Victims were told that this was a private matter, but she does not believe that and nor should we.

The hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) drew our attention to a 22-year-old woman police officer who was killed in the 1983 bombing of Harrods. A United

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

States citizen was eventually compensated by Libya for that same outrage. The hon. Gentleman wants similar legislation to that which has now been passed by Congress in the United States—the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act. It will be interesting to hear what the Minister says about that.

We then heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Mr Hepburn), who has been a member of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee since 2004. He said that we must never forget the victims over so many years who are still suffering today. That was generally the theme of this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), if I may call him that, said that it was time for this matter to be debated on the Floor of the House and at last we were debating it. He also said that British citizens had been failed by their own Government. As always, his words were strong and very clear.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) hoped that the Minister would be the champion of the campaign for compensation for these victims. He spoke about the IRA terror attack in his constituency in February 1996 and the effect that that had on victims. The hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) said that not just explosives were supplied by Libya. He told us the story of the 80 tonnes of weapons on the Swedish ship, the *Villa*, including SAM missiles and rocket-propelled grenades. Of course, he should know better than anybody exactly how that happened.

Finally, we heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who stands shoulder to shoulder with the innocent victims of terror and was appalled by the different treatment of victims on UK soil, with foreign victims treated somewhat better than domestic victims.

This debate is connected to a private Member's Bill submitted in the other place by Lord Empey. According to Lord Empey, since the lifting of sanctions against Libya in 2004, there has been a series of missed opportunities to sort out this issue of compensation once and for all. The use of weapons supplied by the Libyan Government exacerbated the violence in Northern Ireland. However, the Government—not just this Government but previous Governments—have rejected many calls from several quarters, from cross-party groups to civil society organisations, to press the legitimate Government of Libya, if we can find out who they are, to compensate the victims.

There is no doubt that the Gaddafi Government sponsored terrorism in Northern Ireland—we have heard many examples this afternoon—and in other parts of the world. From 2004, the Libyan Government have been active in processes to compensate victims of terrorism in the United Kingdom by third parties that it sponsored, such as the IRA. However, since 2011, Libya has descended into civil war, which considerably complicates matters of trying to obtain compensation. The United Kingdom Government have made it clear that compensation for these victims of terrorism should be pursued through civil proceedings. That contrasts with the Governments of the United States, Germany and France, who have intervened forcefully and directly to try to obtain compensation for victims of direct Libyan terror. The problem is that Libya is in the throes of a civil war

involving competing authorities. Right now, there does not seem to be an end to that conflict, nor a clear picture of who the legitimate authorities are.

In the 1970s and '80s, at the height of the troubles, Libya supplied the IRA with vast quantities of weapons. Many Members, especially the hon. Member for Beckenham, have talked about how much was supplied. I understand that the amount of arms was at least 1,000 rifles, with appropriate ammunition, and at least 10 tonnes of Semtex, plus all the other destructive weapons that have claimed so many lives.

Bob Stewart: I intervene briefly just to remind the House that many people were killed not by explosives but through the use of the other weapons that Libya provided, and we will never be able to ascertain exactly who they were, either.

Fabian Hamilton: I thank the hon. Gentleman—the hon. and gallant Gentleman—for that important contribution.

Over 3,500 people died in the troubles over many decades. To quote the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report of 2017:

“There is no doubt that the weapons, funding, training, and explosives that Colonel Gaddafi provided to the Provisional IRA over the course of 25 years both extended and exacerbated the Northern Ireland Troubles, and caused enormous human suffering.”

I want to read two further quotes. One is from the Minister, who said:

“There is no lawful basis on which the UK could seize or change the ownership of any Libyan assets. The UN Security Council resolution under which those assets were frozen, which the UK supported, is clear that they should eventually be returned for the benefit of the Libyan people. To breach that resolution would be a violation of international law.”—[*Official Report*, 14 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 256WH.]

The second is from the hon. Member for Tewkesbury, the former Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, who said:

“The UK Government cannot allow this litany of missed chances to continue. There needs to be direct dialogue with the Libyan Government, and if the situation there makes this impossible, the Government must begin the process of establishing a fund themselves.”

I would be interested to hear the Minister's comments. I want to make it clear that Labour Members—like, I am sure, Members on both sides of the House—have nothing but sympathy and support for every single victim of IRA terrorism, especially when much of that bloodshed was assisted by Gaddafi's Libyan regime.

In conclusion, I would like to ask the Minister a number of questions. First, is there incontrovertible evidence of the supply of up to 10 tonnes of Semtex and more than 1,000 rifles by the Gaddafi regime to the IRA? Secondly, have the Government compiled a list of victims of the IRA and their families who the Government have evidence were victims of Libyan-sponsored IRA terrorism—in other words, where there is a connection between the two? Thirdly, has the Foreign and Commonwealth Office spoken to whoever is currently recognised as the legitimate Government of Libya about the possibility of providing any compensation for the supply of explosives and arms to the IRA by the Gaddafi regime?

Fourthly, has the Minister had any contact with countries that have negotiated compensation deals with Libya on behalf of their citizens who are the victims of

terrorism directly or indirectly perpetrated by Libya? Fifthly, is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office providing every possible assistance to the families affected by Libyan-sponsored IRA terrorism? Is there any more the FCO can do to help and support those families and victims, such as the provision of translation services or access to any evidence of the connection between the IRA and the then Libyan regime? Finally, can the Minister comment on what the hon. Member for South Suffolk said about the US victim of the 1983 Harrods bombing being compensated while his constituent is still waiting?

4.47 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): First, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) for securing the debate and echo the tributes paid to him by a number of Members for his long-standing commitment and work on this issue. I couple that with my thanks to all those who have taken part in the debate, many of whom have contributed to this issue over a period of time—for too long. Those include the hon. Members for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), for Jarrow (Mr Hepburn), for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friends the Members for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) and for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), and the hon. Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton).

This is a difficult debate. The ultimate justice and the basic facts are not in dispute among us. Without going into the answers to all the questions raised by the hon. Member for Leeds North East, which I will give him, the evidence is sufficient for us to speak today with confidence that Semtex and other materials supplied by the Gaddafi regime into Ireland and on to the mainland of the UK were responsible for IRA-based terror. The Government do not seek to dispute that in any way. There is also no dispute about the sympathy for victims, which has been echoed around the Chamber.

We are left with the complex issue of what to do. If this was straightforward and simple, it would have been sorted, but it is not. It joins one or two other issues that, in the past, have been considered almost too difficult to solve, and we may be getting into that sort of territory.

Let me say a little about the Government's position, which will answer some of the questions raised, and then I will turn to some conclusions. At the end, I will give my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury a moment to wrap up.

The Government have the greatest sympathy for the victims and their families, many of whom, as we have heard it eloquently put this afternoon, continue to live with the devastating physical and emotional consequences of these attacks. They are, quite understandably, determined to seek recompense for what they have suffered. It is right that we in the Government do our utmost to help them seek a solution, and we will continue to do so.

Today's debate is timely. As a number of Members are aware, I have recently been in Libya to fulfil, I trust, that part of the Foreign Secretary's commitment on behalf of the FCO to do what we can to be more visible and to tackle things directly. In my discussions with the Libyan Ministers for Foreign Affairs and for Justice, I explained that although victims of some other Gaddafi-

sponsored attacks, such as the Lockerbie bombing, had received compensation from the Libyan authorities, victims of Gaddafi-sponsored IRA terrorism had not. I told them that victims, their families and the UK Government feel incredibly strongly about that and that the Government attach great importance to finding a resolution.

Just in passing, to answer the question why other people got compensation, it is not correct to say that the UK Government do not and did not negotiate on behalf of victims. The Government helped to secure compensation for the victims of the Lockerbie bombing and for the family of WPC Fletcher. Compensation was possible in those cases because of evidence that the attacks were planned and executed directly by the Libyans. While we are not formally espousing the claims of victims of Gaddafi-sponsored IRA terrorism, we do continue to impress on the Libyan authorities the importance of making progress on this issue, and we have done that where we felt it was possible to do so.

I urged the Libyan Government to demonstrate that they were taking these cases seriously, and I suggested that they consider meeting victims and their representatives to discuss a possible way forward. Both Ministers I spoke to expressed sympathy with the victims and their families. However, they also spoke of the many urgent political, security and economic challenges that Libya is facing. They made it clear that this is a particularly difficult time to discuss legacy cases and compensation.

I can assure the House, as Members would expect me to, that I made it very clear, as I and other colleagues have in the past, that this is a priority for the UK Government. I have since written to both Ministers to reiterate that and to reiterate further the importance of a meeting between Libyan representatives and victims' groups.

Jim Shannon: I am conscious when I ask the Minister a question that he is a Minister who wants to give us the answer. If a bombing takes place that involves Semtex, one conclusion would be that it was an IRA bomb and came from Libya. If somebody is shot with an AK-47, it would be a good conclusion to draw that that was also the IRA and that the gun came from Libya, or, if it was a rocket-propelled grenade launcher, that that came from Libya. The instruments of war indicate where these things come from.

Alistair Burt: I am not in a position in any way to dispute what the hon. Gentleman says. There may well be some issues, if we look at compensation as a whole, about distinguishing between different groups, but that is a slightly different issue. However, we are clear what we are talking about here: there is enough evidence, and there will be victims of Gaddafi-sponsored terrorism Semtex who we can all be very clear about.

Lady Hermon rose—

James Cartlidge rose—

Alistair Burt: I will give way, but I need to finish at 4.57 pm to give my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury time, and I cannot make progress if I am constantly responding to interventions.

Lady Hermon: I am enormously grateful to the Minister, for whom I have the highest regard—he is a very good Foreign Office Minister. After his visit to Libya, he described the UK as

“a strong partner and friend of Libya.”

If Libya is a friend of the UK, what possible justification can there be for delaying compensation for one day more?

Alistair Burt: I do not think that the presently constituted Libyan Government is in any position to make a decision in relation to such compensation or to pay it. In answer to the hon. Lady's question, that is one of the practical issues that we are dealing with at the moment.

James Cartledge: I am delighted that the Minister is raising this issue. Did he discuss with Libyan representatives any aspect of the frozen assets issue? Did he remind them that, if those assets are to be unfrozen, that will require a resolution of the UN Security Council, in which we have a vote?

Alistair Burt: No, I did not raise that at this time. Our position on the frozen assets is known, but let me come back to that in a moment. If I may, I will make a little progress so that I can present some conclusions.

One or two colleagues raised the issue of visibility, which the Foreign Secretary has previously raised with the Prime Minister of Libya. As far as visibility is concerned, we will continue to raise the matter at the highest level with Libyan counterparts. However, I must say that my conclusion from such meetings and from meeting Ministers myself is that I just do not think they are in a position to deal with this or to put forward anything at present. I am not sure that we can put any timescale on this process, which means that we may have to think about it differently. Progress is likely to continue to be difficult and slow until the situation in Libya changes significantly for the better.

Hon. Members have raised the question of Libyan assets. I do not want to take too much time, but I must repeat that the advice I have been given is that there is no lawful basis on which the UK could seize or change the ownership of any Libyan assets, whether they are owned by the Gaddafi family or by the Libyan state. The UN Security Council resolution under which these assets were frozen is clear that they should eventually be returned for the benefit of the Libyan people, and to breach the resolution would be a violation of international law.

We set out our position on several of the issues that have been mentioned in the Government response to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report last year, and in substance the position has not changed, but let me look towards the future. The Government will continue to help victims engage directly with the Libyan authorities to pursue their campaign for compensation. The Foreign Secretary and I have previously met victims groups and the hon. Members who support them, and we remain committed to keeping them and the House updated on any developments.

In view of the likely absence of any progress within a reasonable timescale, I will now write to my colleagues across the Government to explore whether there is anything else the UK Government can do to support

victims, their families and their communities. Hon. Members have previously suggested the idea of a community fund to provide assistance with physical, emotional and mental rehabilitation. I will discuss this with my colleagues across the Government and explore what further support may be available under existing Government schemes. I will strongly take into account what hon. Members have said about the way in which we must approach relationships with a friendly Government in Libya who are, at present, unable to respond.

In conclusion, I am quite clear that the concerns raised today have been raised for far too long. We have a long tradition in this House of eventually getting around to things which, under successive Governments, ought to have been done—Hillsborough, contaminated blood and the matter raised by my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General earlier this afternoon—and, except for the victims themselves, there are very few clean hands. I and my colleagues are being urged to do more, and I will do my best to keep open all channels of pressure on the Libyan Government, as we help them with stabilisation and for the future. With other colleagues in the Government, I will also try to be as imaginative as possible in dealing with the current situation and with requests for us to do more.

4.58 pm

Mr Robertson: I have been in the House for 21 years, and I do not think I have ever before attended a debate in which I have agreed with every single word that has been said. There is such strength of feeling on this issue, and that is with speakers from four different political parties and, indeed, an independent Member, so the debate has been quite extraordinary.

I will quickly pick up on one or two issues mentioned by the Minister. He acknowledged that the Government intervened on the Lockerbie and Yvonne Fletcher tragedies. However, given that the Government accept that Libya has been involved with supplying arms and Semtex, I do not see why they cannot take up the individual cases we have discussed today. I cannot see the difference. The Minister said that a Libyan Government are not yet in place, but we have been told that for a number of years, and time is passing, so we have to find other ways forward. I thank the Minister for saying that he will explore other avenues throughout the Government.

On the assets, we understand the position, but the motion asks the Government to seek international agreement. Nobody is suggesting that we should break international law. The motion says that we should seek international agreement and co-operation on this issue, and I ask the Minister to take that back and discuss it with his Government colleagues. I am pleased that he is taking forward this issue, and I thank him very much for his response. Finally, all I would ask is that, as far as he can, he keeps me and other Members informed of the progress he is making.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls on the Government to take steps to obtain the required international authority to use a proportion of the assets of the Libyan Government that were frozen in the UK to compensate the relatives of people murdered and injured as a result of Libyan-sponsored IRA terrorism and to fund community support programmes in areas affected by that terrorism.

Crossrail Extension to Ebbsfleet

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Paul Maynard.)

5 pm

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I am pleased to have secured this debate and to have the opportunity to argue that the Government should prioritise the extension of the Crossrail line—now known as the Elizabeth line out of respect to Her Majesty—to Ebbsfleet in my constituency. That route was the original plan for Crossrail, so in effect I am asking for the job to be finished and for the line to be completed in accordance with that original plan.

Crossrail is a marvellous piece of engineering that stretches from Heathrow to Abbey Wood and connects London from west to east and vice versa. Ebbsfleet plays host to another wonderful technological achievement in High Speed 1, which connects London to Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam in a short period. It is the fastest rail service in the UK, and it is key to us pursuing the Government's aim of a deep and special relationship with the European Union after Brexit. It is therefore absurd that those two great engineering achievements are separated by 10 miles—a gap that could be closed if we were to connect the two lines as previously envisaged. The two lines nearly merge further down the line at Stratford, but to travel on Crossrail and connect to High Speed 1, a passenger has to get off one train and walk a fair distance through a shopping centre to catch the second train. We all believe in connectivity in our transport network, but that example highlights the complete opposite.

High Speed 1 at Ebbsfleet, where the new garden city is being built, is currently denied a direct connection with Crossrail. That needs to change not just for the benefit of future generations, but for reasons of basic common sense. After Crossrail is completed, every county surrounding the capital will directly benefit from that project, with one exception—Kent. Despite not having any underground stations, we were chosen to be the county to miss out, and that simply cannot be right.

There is huge potential for economic growth east of London and for brownfield sites to be utilised, but the lack of connectivity holds back existing opportunities. There is also a clear demand for more capacity on rail services in north Kent. The number of people using Dartford station has risen by a third in the last 10 years, and the numbers using Ebbsfleet have more than doubled in the time that High Speed 1 has been operational.

The Thames Estuary 2050 Growth Commission is due to provide the Government with its recommendations for growth in the area—I believe that will take place at the end of this month—and I hope that, even at this late stage, it will include the points raised in this debate in its submissions. I pay tribute to the work the commission is undertaking to assist in this area. I also pay tribute to the tireless work of Dartford Borough Council, Bexley Borough Council and Kent County Council. Hon. Members across the House have worked with those authorities, in a cross-party way, to try to ensure that we get Crossrail extended out to Ebbsfleet.

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman, my constituency neighbour, for giving way. Bexley Borough Council, which he knows

very well, has a growth strategy for the north of the borough, where the Crossrail extension would come through. The extension is absolutely integral to the pace and change of the growth strategy and to ensure we have housing for Londoners to deal with the overspill coming out from the middle of the city.

Gareth Johnson: It was an honour to serve for years with the hon. Lady on Bexley Borough Council. She is absolutely right. The Government try to identify locations where we can develop on brownfield sites and they are in abundance in this area. The same happened when the Labour party was in government. The infrastructure needs to be in place and a crucial part of that is Crossrail itself. If Crossrail extends to Ebbsfleet, providing the transport link that is currently missing, golden opportunities in north Bexley, Dartford and Gravesham could come to fruition.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): There would be a wider benefit to what my hon. Friend is proposing for Kent as a whole. For example, it would provide Kent with direct access to Heathrow, which it currently lacks. That would relieve congestion considerably in all parts of Kent, not least on the M25.

Gareth Johnson: My right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour makes a very important point. I read today that some 2 million journeys are carried out from constituencies in the south-east, such as Sevenoaks and Dartford, to Heathrow. A large proportion of those 2 million journeys would be unnecessary if there was a direct connection between Ebbsfleet and Heathrow airport. It is possible to go from Heathrow airport right across the capital to Essex and various other counties around London, but it is not possible to connect with HS1 at Ebbsfleet. It is complete madness to have that gap. It needs to be filled.

It is for that reason that I am reluctant to refer to this proposal as an extension, despite the title of the debate, because this is more about finishing the job that was started and completing the original plans for Crossrail. This debate is about completing the job. It is nothing short of ludicrous for the two greatest technological achievements in rail infrastructure, Crossrail and HS1, to not connect with each other. There is a gap here: 10 miles of missed opportunities; 10 miles that could lead to the transformation of the area and boost the economy in a way that would far outweigh any implementation costs.

I will conclude my comments there, because I know that other Members wish to speak. I will simply say that for all the time the gap is there, in my mind the Crossrail project will be incomplete.

5.8 pm

David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson)—my constituency neighbour—on securing this important debate. It is a pleasure to join him in helping to highlight the potential benefits of extending Crossrail to Ebbsfleet.

For years, the borough of Bexley has suffered from a terrible rail service. Delays, cancellations and poor excuses have become the norm. The situation is made worse because Bexley is one of the only London boroughs

[David Evennett]

that does not have an underground service. We are at a great disadvantage, because we have only the one service, Southeastern, that goes through the borough. When there are problems with Southeastern, which as the Minister knows occur far too often, there is no viable alternative to travel to central London other than taking a bus to a neighbouring borough to catch the tube or the docklands light railway.

Today, we are specifically discussing the potential extension of Crossrail to Ebbsfleet, which is a campaign I strongly support. Locally in my borough and my constituency, there is huge support for a project that finishes the job. People want better rail availability and choice.

Extending Crossrail to Ebbsfleet not only improves the opportunities for commuters to get into London, but provides a great opportunity to improve the whole area in so many different ways. My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford has highlighted the extension into Essex and the extension into west London. The only part of London that does not benefit from either of the two huge railway infrastructure projects that he highlighted is, of course, our area of south-east London and north-west Kent.

I say to the Minister that it is great news that Crossrail is coming to Abbey Wood in the London borough of Greenwich, but that does not provide a viable alternative for Bexley residents, nor—it is very important for him to take note of this—does it provide the opportunity for development in Bexley, as well as in north-west Kent.

Teresa Pearce: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that this is about not just housing development, but business development? In Abbey Wood, which is in the middle of my constituency, a major new supermarket has opened ahead of the opening of Crossrail. That has happened completely because of the Crossrail effect.

David Evennett: Indeed. I am delighted to see the hon. Lady here, showing that we have cross-party support for what we are discussing—and she is absolutely right. I was going to come on to that, but she is ahead of me. This is not just about new homes; it is also about businesses and jobs, which are vital for our local economy.

Estimates from the C2E—the Crossrail to Ebbsfleet—campaign suggest that extending Crossrail to Ebbsfleet, as was initially intended, would create an additional 17,500 jobs in Bexley alone, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford said. The C2E campaign also suggests that along the whole route, the extension would bring forward a possible 55,000 new homes. In Bexley alone, it is estimated that this would accelerate the provision of 30,000 new homes across our borough, directly unlocking 16,000 of these. This is not just a railway, but a regeneration and an opportunity to develop—to get jobs, homes and businesses.

As both my hon. Friend and the Minister will be aware, Crossrail was originally intended to be extended through Bexley and out into Kent. Disappointingly, that was not taken up, but now is the opportunity to do that and make something really worthwhile. The arguments that my hon. Friend has presented today, assisted by interventions from my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) and the

hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce), highlight the compelling reasons to do just that. By completing the original plans, there is a unique opportunity to secure major new housing and growth between Abbey Wood and Ebbsfleet. We should jump at this opportunity, because I believe that without action, poor transport will continue to hold back our area in development, regeneration and improvement. We cannot accept that and I hope that the Minister takes that on board. It is so important to south-east London—as a Member in Bromley, he knows exactly the situation.

We are going to be in post-Brexit Britain. We need to be proactive and never more than on vital infrastructure projects, which will give us the cutting edge in our area to develop, go forward and achieve for our constituents and our country.

5.13 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on securing this debate about the proposal to extend Crossrail to Ebbsfleet. At the outset, I pay special tribute to my right hon. Friends the Members for Bexleyheath and Crayford (David Evennett) and for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), who is not here this afternoon, as well as the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce), for their consistent championing of the—well, we are not allowed to call it the “extension” to Ebbsfleet, but the “completion” of the Crossrail project. They have worked very closely for a long time alongside council leaders, some of whom are in the Public Gallery this afternoon, from Bexley—Teresa O'Neill—as well as from Dartford and Kent.

Across the UK, the Government are investing record amounts to improve the experience of rail passengers. State-of-the-art infrastructure, new and longer trains, smart ticketing, improved information and updated wi-fi are all contributing to the creation of a modern, 21st-century railway that will drive our economic prosperity—and drive it into the post-Brexit period evoked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford a few moments ago.

Crossrail is a key part of that investment. The project is now over 92% complete, and, as Members have recognised, it will have a truly transformative impact on the public transport network, not only in London but across the south-east and beyond. When it is fully open in December 2019, the railway will deliver a 10% increase in London's rail capacity, carrying up to 200 million passengers a year and with up to 24 trains per hour running at peak times. The new line will bring an extra 1.5 million people to within 45 minutes of London's key business and entertainment districts. It will link major employment, leisure and business districts—Heathrow airport, the west end, the City and Canary Wharf—which have never been linked in that way before, enabling real and valuable economic development to take place.

I want to take this opportunity to reflect again on the magnificent scale of what is being achieved with Crossrail: not only the surmounting of engineering and technical challenges to build the first new railway for a generation, but the immense economic impact that the project has had, not just in London but throughout the UK. Companies of all sizes across the country have won contracts for work on it, including the construction of

70 brand-new trains at Bombardier's historic plant in Derby. Overall, it is supporting up to 55,000 new jobs, creating more than 1,000 apprenticeship opportunities for our young people and adding up to £42 billion to the UK economy. The sheer ambition of this project cannot be overestimated; neither can the great legacy that will be created by its use of innovative technologies, and the vast skills capital that it will leave in its wake, to be passed on to other infrastructure projects that are planned across the UK.

The Elizabeth line—as my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford said, that is how it will be known from later this year—will have a transformative effect on travel in south-east London and beyond when it opens in December. Journey times to and from central London will be significantly reduced, wider regional connectivity will improve considerably, and I anticipate that new travel patterns will emerge. Indeed, I expect that a significant number of passengers will wish to transfer to the Elizabeth line at Abbey Wood.

My hon. Friend asked about the current route of the Elizabeth line and whether it could be extended to Ebbsfleet. The Department for Transport, which sponsors this project jointly with Transport for London, has received many queries over the years about whether the route could or should be extended beyond its western, eastern or south-eastern arms, or whether, indeed, entirely new branches should be developed. As Members will know, the current 60-mile route runs from Reading in the west to Shenfield in the east and Abbey Wood in the south-east, with a spur that will also serve Heathrow airport terminals 2,3,4 and 5 when it is fully open in December 2019. The Elizabeth line, which will pass through 41 stations—10 of which are newly constructed—was developed over a period of many years, and it has been planned to maximise benefits to passengers as well as ensuring that the timetable is operationally viable. It is therefore crucial for any discussion about extending the current route to be placed in the context of the transport improvements that are already planned for the area. Let me say a few words about those.

In respect of the specific issue of an Ebbsfleet Crossrail extension, my hon. Friend is aware that a detailed review of the business case was undertaken in 2004. It recommended that the south-eastern branch should go only as far as Abbey Wood, and that was reflected in the Crossrail Act 2008.

I am aware, however, that Transport for London is currently working with local authorities in London and north Kent as part of the Thames Gateway Kent Partnership to prepare a strategic outline business case. My understanding is that this will look at options to improve transport connectivity and capacity to support the development of new homes and jobs in the area—the regeneration of the area to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford referred. I pay tribute to the work in particular of the Crossrail to Ebbsfleet campaign and council leaders Teresa O'Neill and Jeremy Kite, and I look forward to seeing the outputs of this work and to the Department receiving the full strategic outline business case in short order.

I further acknowledge the work undertaken to develop the regeneration aspirations for Ebbsfleet and the wider area by the Thames Estuary 2050 Growth Commission.

I understand the commission is shortly due to publish, in this case its report on the vision for the development and growth in the region.

Gareth Johnson: I hear what the Minister says about the decision made not to extend out to Abbey Wood, but does he agree that this part of north Kent has changed significantly since that decision was made? We have thousands more homes and greater pressures on our rail system than at that time, and the pressure on housing generally is greater now. We also had traffic problems with the Lower Thames crossing, and the issues relating to Heathrow airport that I mentioned and people getting from north Kent to Heathrow. All those issues have evolved over this period, strengthening the arguments for extending Crossrail to Ebbsfleet.

Joseph Johnson: I do indeed recognise that that part of north Kent has changed considerably over the decade since the passage of the Act I mentioned, which is why it is important that we are about to receive this new work from the Thames Gateway Kent Partnership looking at overall growth prospects for the region, and are also about to receive the fully developed strategic outline business case. This will enable the Department to take a fresh look at the case for extending Crossrail to Ebbsfleet, but, as a Member who also represents a constituency in that part of the world, I share my hon. Friend's frustration and recognise that there are aspirations that are currently unmet, and he has made a strong case for the extension today.

In the context of these plans for housing-led regeneration of this part of north Kent, I also recognise that there is renewed interest in discussions about the transport infrastructure and capacity improvements that would be required to unlock development. I am sure my hon. Friend welcomes the future enhancements to the strategic road network with the planned A2 junction improvements at Bean and Ebbsfleet. These improvements will support economic and housing growth in north Kent, including Ebbsfleet Garden City, and demonstrate the Government's commitment to invest in transport infrastructure.

I acknowledge that many of these recent discussions have focused on the proposal to extend the south-eastern arm of the Elizabeth line to Ebbsfleet and that the extension proposal was included in the Mayor of London's transport strategy published in March. The Department's current priority is the delivery of the Elizabeth line. Any extension to the route would require a strong business case and need to be technically feasible, and include the identification of funding.

As my hon. Friend will understand, any request for Government support would need to satisfy the value-for-money and affordability criteria and be consistent with the new process we announced in March for the development and delivery of rail enhancements. The rail network enhancements pipeline is designed to ensure that future rail projects are properly planned and scrutinised to deliver maximum value and benefit to rail users and taxpayers. Alongside this pipeline, we have launched a call for ideas for market-led proposals to create a new tier of investment in rail infrastructure from the private sector.

I shall now describe some of the improvements already planned for rail in the south-east. From later this month, new Thameslink services will link Woolwich, Abbey Wood and north Kent to Blackfriars, Farringdon and

[Joseph Johnson]

St Pancras for the first time, which, together with the Elizabeth line from December 2018, will deliver faster, more convenient journeys for passengers and improved connectivity.

I also want to draw attention to the work the Department is doing with regard to the new Southeastern franchise due to launch from April 2019. The Southeastern rail franchise public consultation document, also published in March 2017, set out ambitious proposals to transform the train service for passengers on the Southeastern network. Our specification for the new franchise is expected to be delivered by no later than December 2022 and will provide better and more reliable journeys and more room for passengers, integrating seamlessly with future Thameslink and Elizabeth line services. I have no doubt that this will transform travel across London, Kent and parts of East Sussex and will be delivered through a brand-new collaborative partnership between the next operator and Network Rail.

In addition, longer, higher-capacity trains will provide space for around 60,000 more passengers in the morning rush-hour. Metro-style trains will operate on suburban routes in south-east London and north Kent, similar to those on other high-capacity lines into London.

The Government's vision for stronger performance and reliability will be delivered through a brand-new collaborative partnership between the next operator and Network Rail. This will deliver shared incentives to ensure that both organisations work together to put the passenger first and to deliver a more reliable, efficient railway. The new franchise also recognises the step change in connectivity that the Elizabeth line to Abbey Wood will offer Southeastern passengers. Bidders must provide regular services to and from Abbey Wood and deliver innovative pay-as-you-go ticketing.

In summary, I hope I have demonstrated the Government's commitment both to rail improvements and to wider regeneration in this area of the south-east.

Teresa Pearce: I have listened carefully to the Minister. Would he not accept that south-east London is massively underserved by transport compared with the rest of London and that stopping at Abbey Wood does not help Bexley at all?

Joseph Johnson: I agree that south-east London is dependent on the Southeastern franchise and that particular train operator. It is unique in not having competition. I would not wholly agree, however, with the hon. Lady's point about Abbey Wood or with the early point that Kent will not benefit at all from Crossrail. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) said, it will benefit, to the extent that it will have increased connectivity at Abbey Wood, with options to connect Southeastern services directly to the Elizabeth line.

David Evennett: Yes, a new franchise would be great and is desperately needed—at the moment it is so bad it cannot be believed—but the problem is the bigger picture: investment, regeneration and getting more homes, jobs and businesses into the area. That cannot be done just by improving a rail service that is inadequate at the moment.

Joseph Johnson: My right hon. Friend has long been a powerful champion for the completion of this extension and is continuing to be a strong advocate for it. All I can say is that the Department is looking forward to receiving the work of the commission and the full strategic outline business case so that we can give this proposal the fullest possible consideration.

In conclusion, I hope I have demonstrated the Government's commitment to rail improvements and the wider regeneration in this area of the south-east.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 10 May 2018

[PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

Community Transport

1.30 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the First Report of the Transport Committee, Community Transport and the Department for Transport's proposed consultation, HC 480, and the Government response, HC 832.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the other members of the Transport Committee for their work on this inquiry. I am pleased to see that my hon. Friends the Members for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), for Easington (Grahame Morris) and for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), and many hon. Members from across the House, are present to debate our report.

The Transport Committee often scrutinises multibillion-pound investment in roads and railways—high-profile mega-infrastructure projects. Community transport rarely comes under the spotlight, yet it encapsulates what local transport is for: connecting people with their communities. It is vital to many thousands of users, who are often the most vulnerable in society, and it provides them with reliable, high-quality and, above all, friendly and caring local transport services.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): On that point, in my constituency I have a provider called Torfaen Community Transport, which is exactly as my hon. Friend says. Does she agree that, with rules and regulations, it is important to recognise the special status of community transport and the excellent services it provides?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is exactly right, and I suspect I will hear from many more hon. Members who want to talk about their local providers.

On reading through the many comments on the Committee's online forum from community transport groups, drivers, users young and old, their families and even a tea shop and bed and breakfast in the Yorkshire Dales, it is clear just how important those services are to people's daily lives. It is noticeable how many people referred to them as a lifeline. I recommend that everyone looks at #WithoutCT on Twitter to see the range of socially valuable activities that would simply not be possible for some without a local community transport operator.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for the report and for what the Transport Committee is doing on it. Community transport is important, especially in more rural areas, and especially to enable our elderly to get to hospitals all over the place. We have to try to provide some direct help with fuel costs or insurance—something that will keep those community groups going. They often cannot afford to

run commercially, but they can do such a good job with some support. They do so all across my constituency, as I am sure they do across hers.

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman is right that those services are invaluable. It might be a regular trip to the shops, a lift to a social or sports club, or a visit to the doctor or hospital, as he just said. It could even be something that we would all strongly advocate: a lift to the polling station on election day.

Community transport encompasses a broad range of services, whether that is lift-giving by volunteer car drivers, dial-a-ride minibuses for people with disabilities or other mobility problems, or community bus routes that would not otherwise exist because they are not commercially viable. I have seen the importance of Nottingham community transport in my area, and I am sure that we all have wonderful examples that showcase how local community transport operators serve our constituencies. That is why we support and highly value community transport, and why we want and need more of it, not less. We must not take it for granted.

A vibrant, not-for-profit community-based system is becoming increasingly important to complement existing commercial bus and taxi services, and to plug gaps in provision that are growing in many places because of pressure on local authority budgets. Last summer, however, the community transport sector faced an existential crisis. The Department proposed an about-turn in relation to not-for-profit operator licensing arrangements that could have serious, perhaps catastrophic, implications. Grave concerns were expressed by the sector, and by hon. Members across the House, which is why the Transport Committee became involved. I am proud that it was the first issue we considered after I was elected as Chair.

We heard evidence from all sides, including from the commercial operators who claim that there is unfairness in the current system, from hundreds of community organisations that feel under threat, and from the public bodies whose job it is to oversee the licensing and regulation of both sectors: the Department for Transport, the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency and traffic commissioners. Our report was published in December and the Government responded in February, alongside the launch of their consultation on proposed changes.

My anxiety is that despite the work of our Committee and others to expose the dangers of the Department's approach, the Government have not yet started to listen fully or engage properly with those legitimate concerns. A potential crisis has not yet been averted.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. Following that consultation, the portfolio holder in the East Riding of Yorkshire Council said that little had changed from the Department for Transport's proposal, which will have devastating consequences for the sector in the East Riding of Yorkshire. Community groups such as Goole GoFar and Age UK Lindsey rely on volunteer drivers. The truth is that the Government have simply not understood what the proposals will do to that sector. They should listen to councils such as the East Riding of Yorkshire that know how it works.

Lilian Greenwood: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I hope that during this important debate, we can begin to get the assurances we need from the Minister.

[*Lilian Greenwood*]

The UK has taken a unique approach to community transport by legislating for a relatively light-touch, affordable regime through the section 19 and section 22 permits of the Transport Act 1985. It is widely acknowledged, including by the Government, that the regime has provided an effective framework within which not-for-profit organisations can safely provide community-based local transport services. The Government have also very broadly accepted throughout that the long-established permit regime still achieves that. Furthermore, they accept that developments in the sector that have led to the current situation have been not only supported by official guidance, but explicitly encouraged by local and central Government for many years.

Not-for-profit community organisations have been encouraged to become more professional in outlook and, in the face of growing pressure on local authority budgets, to become more financially self-sufficient. Community organisations have responded to that call by quite properly and, I stress, in accordance with the official guidance, developing their operating models to deliver services via a mix of grant funding and local authority contracts.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the changing situation in local authorities—I have seen it in Cambridgeshire—whereby mainstream services have disappeared to be replaced by not just voluntary, but professional schemes, has led to those problems?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is right. Many community organisations, some very successfully, have achieved greater self-sufficiency and sustainability by cross-subsidising what can be thought of as core community transport services with income from contracts for school and social care transport, for example.

And so to the bombshell of last summer. At the end of July, in what the Department seems to have hoped would be a relatively innocuous letter from a senior official to issuers of section 19 and section 22 permits, it set out a new approach, which was contrary to the official guidance that had been applied for decades but in line with a new interpretation of EU regulation 1071/2009, which has been in force since 2011. This is the crux of the matter: there is a potential misalignment of the relevant sections of the 1985 Act and its associated guidance and practice, and EU law.

The European regulation defines three derogations from the operator and driver licensing requirements on the mainstream commercial sector: where organisations are engaged in road passenger transport services exclusively for non-commercial purposes; where they have a main occupation other than that of road passenger transport operator; and where organisations have only a minor impact on the transport market because of the short distances involved. Member states can choose whether to apply the third derogation.

The Department's letter noted the findings of a DVSA investigation into the licensing arrangements of an individual community operator in Erewash, Derbyshire—I see the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) is present. Essentially, that investigation, which was conducted in response to a complaint from a commercial operator,

found that as the operator in question held a number of competitively tendered local authority contracts, it could not be considered to be operating for non-commercial purposes.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Is the hon. Lady aware that to date this is the only case that has been brought forward in response to this letter issued by the DFT?

Lilian Greenwood: Yes, the hon. Lady is right—absolutely. For years, guidance and practice in the UK had considered “not-for-profit” and “non-commercial” to be interchangeable terms. The DVSA investigation and the DFT's letter signalled a completely new interpretation. The consequence for the operator investigated by the DVSA was that it could no longer operate on the basis of community transport permits, because—according to the new interpretation—the derogations from full public service vehicle operator and passenger carrying vehicle driver licensing did not apply.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Did the Select Committee have any chance to access any legal advice on this rather startling interpretation of this regulation, which has been interpreted in totally different ways, as the hon. Lady said, for decades? Very little policy point seems to lie behind the changes that are being proposed, and I wonder whether we are somewhat pedantically accepting a rather eccentric legal opinion that is threatening very genuine voluntary services that are quite non-profit making in many parts of the country.

Lilian Greenwood: The right hon. and learned Gentleman makes a very important point, and I think that it is for the Minister to explain precisely why he has taken this specific legal approach to the interpretation of the regulation. I am sure that he will do so in his response to the debate.

The DVSA told Erewash Community Transport that it must

“take action to bring its operations into line with all applicable legal requirements”,

and that that applied to all its drivers and services, not just those provided under the terms of contestable contracts. The DFT's letter confirmed that this interpretation was now to be universally applied, and not just applied to one operator, and that it was intended to make clear the broader implications for the community transport sector. The letter acknowledged that existing guidance

“may have provided an inaccurate indication”

of the rules for sections 19 and 22 permit use. Nevertheless, all operators in similar circumstances would

“now need to take action to bring their services into compliance with legal requirements.”

The letter asserted that additional licensing requirements were likely to apply mainly to large, transport-only organisations, and that many—perhaps the majority—of other smaller and community-based permit holders were likely to be unaffected. It said that the DFT intended to explain the implications more fully and to consult on its proposals in the autumn. The evidence to our inquiry, including evidence from hundreds of community transport organisations of various types and sizes, overwhelmingly suggested that that assumption was simply wrong.

Although the DFT's letter may have been well-intentioned and designed to clarify and calm the situation, it achieved the opposite effect, by creating widespread confusion and panic. Mobility Matters, an urgently convened campaign group, told us that its survey evidence suggested that the new requirements were likely to be catastrophic for many community organisations, with 40% saying that they would be unable to carry on operating as a result of the additional costs.

There were many unanswered questions and the broad community transport sector was understandably confused about what action was required and by what date.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for calling this debate. On the Isle of Wight, we have the excellent FYTbus service—the Freshwater, Yarmouth and Totland service. It is very successful and needs no further help. This heavy-handed and bizarre approach to regulation puts a question mark over the future of the FYTbus service, and I think that that is very unnecessary. Does she agree that we need to be encouraging voluntary drivers and the community sector, and not hitting them in this way?

Lilian Greenwood: That is precisely right and my Committee called on the Government not to use a sledgehammer to crack a nut.

After the DFT's letter arrived, traffic commissioners and local authorities were also unclear about its immediate implications. We heard about traffic commissioners sitting on applications for new permits, because they were unsure what to do. We heard about local authorities holding off from agreeing new contracts and that some contracts with permit-holders had already been terminated. Concern was growing that vital and socially valuable services might already be being lost. Frankly, it all seemed to be a total mess and the sector felt in limbo.

The pressure from our inquiry, from the Community Transport Association and from campaign groups such as Mobility Matters perhaps hastened the DFT's attempt to clarify the situation. On 9 November last year, it issued a letter to local authorities, making it clear that at that stage no contracts should be cancelled. On the face of it, that letter also seemed to offer some of the clarifications that were being sought. For example, it explained that services could be considered “non-commercial” where there was demonstrably no commercial market—that is, where a community organisation had stepped in to replace a failed commercial bus route, or where it was delivering a service for which no commercial operator had tendered. Essentially, it set out a potentially broader definition of “non-commercial” and seemed to address some of the more obviously perverse consequences of the initial statement. We therefore welcomed the clarifications as a starting point from which to find a more workable solution.

However, we also concluded that the fact that it had taken more than three months to produce that letter demonstrated the Department's lack of understanding of the sector and the potential impacts of the July proposals. What we wanted, and what we recommended in our report, was for the Government to use their consultation to consider reforms designed not only to achieve compatibility with the EU regulation but to maintain achievement of the key public policy objective—

the provision of high-quality, safe and secure community transport services for people who might otherwise be left isolated.

I was not reassured by the Government's response to our report. It took precisely the legalistic position that we had warned against, and discounted almost all of our recommendations, which were intended to lessen the impacts of the proposals. It did not consider the interplay with commissioning bodies' responsibilities under the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, despite indisputable evidence of the immense social benefits of community transport. In addition, it did not consider establishing any kind of hybrid category, whereby there would be more proportionate licensing requirements for the sector. It could not even set out an appropriate and clearly defined transition period for affected organisations and there was no commitment to offer tangible support to those required to make changes.

It concerns me greatly that the Department has offered no properly reasoned justification for its implacable stance. Given the importance of what is at stake, it is surely incumbent on the Government to explain their thinking. The comments that I am hearing about the consultation, which closed last week, are not encouraging either. The fundamental questions of whether the Government's interpretation of the EU regulation is correct, whether their proposals will achieve what they set out to achieve and whether those proposals are proportionate and workable have not been adequately open to challenge. It amounts to a consultation in name only; the Government's proposals are presented largely as a done deal.

Mobility Matters' opinion, with which I have sympathy, is that the interpretation is arguably wrong. Mobility Matters asserts that the definition of “non-commercial purposes” should be applied to organisations and not only to the services that they provide. For example, it should take account of an organisation's charitable status and the social value that it brings to its local community. Mobility Matters also points out that the issue at hand is about fairness in competition for contracts. If that is the case, logic would suggest that the issue should be dealt with in procurement guidance.

The Minister needs to demonstrate today that the Department has properly engaged with these arguments and properly considered alternative courses of action. However, the Department seems intent on pushing ahead with more stringent, more expensive licensing requirements, without knowing how many operators will be affected and how much this will cost them, or how many operators will be able to bear the strain. There is a real danger that the Government have massively underestimated the detrimental effects on the community transport sector. That is demonstrated by the initial impact assessment, which was published alongside the Government's consultation paper and which, frankly, is woefully inadequate. First, it is dated “October 2016”, when we know, by the Department's own admission, that as recently as last July it did not have a reliable picture of the size or shape of the community transport sector.

Secondly, in the absence of reliable data, the Department seems to have grossly underestimated the total net costs for affected operators, putting it at £69.5 million over 10 years. The Community Transport Association, the trade body set up to support community operators, with the assistance of the Department, puts the figure

[Lilian Greenwood]

at nearly £400 million. The Department's assessment did not monetise substantial costs, including the costs of tachographs, additional insurance, company registration for those needing corporate restructure, and funding required to prove financial standing for PSV operator licences.

The Department's estimate was that 1,567 permit-holders would be affected by the operator or driver licensing requirements, which is 25% of permit-based operators. The CTA's analysis is that 95% of permit-based operators will be affected, which is a total of 5,956 operators. Just today, I received the latest example of the wider impact. Keep Mobile is an operator with 14 paid drivers, three volunteer drivers and 12 minibuses providing services around Berkshire, primarily to vulnerable passengers. Last year, the Prime Minister visited to celebrate its 25th year of operation. However, as a result of the confusion created by the Department's letters, a local authority contract was not renewed and Keep Mobile was forced to make four members of staff redundant and sell two of its vehicles. Now it fears it will have no alternative but to close down. These impacts are real and devastating.

With such a level of uncertainty about the effects of the proposed changes, it is surely incumbent on the Department to take stock, to reconsider or, at the very least, to proceed with extreme caution, and I hope the Minister will be able to assure us that that is the approach he is taking. The published impact assessment is no basis on which to proceed. Frankly, the Department has this back to front: it is announcing its policy without a clear view of the impact that it will have. When will a fuller, more robust impact assessment be published? Is he ready to rethink his plans in the light of that new data?

Will the Minister consider how we got to this point? The Transport Committee concluded that the Department failed to address valid concerns over many years. It acted too slowly. Perhaps now it feels it has painted itself into a legal corner, but why has that happened? As I understand it, complaints about the widely accepted permit system have emanated solely from Martin Allen and his small group of commercial operators, the Bus and Coach Association. The main trade body, the Confederation of Passenger Transport, seemed intensely relaxed about permit use in its evidence to our Committee. Why did the DFT allow the complaints of a small group of commercial operators to rumble on for years? If it had addressed these relatively localised complaints years ago, could we have avoided the current situation? Why could localised problems in relation to competition for local authority contracts not be dealt with through procurement guidance? Why the need for a new, blanket approach to operator and driver licensing when we all accept that the permit system has worked effectively for decades and very broadly still does?

Martin Allen and the BCA say they want an end to unfair competition, but is there not a very real danger that they will succeed in eliminating all competition from community transport operators? Has the Department for Transport and the European Commission effectively been bullied into proposals that could do immense harm to vital community services and achieve precisely the opposite of the regulations' intention?

Mr Seely: The whole point about voluntary bus services, such as the FYTBus and others that we are here to defend, is that they take up the slack where there is no commercial option because the commercial bus operators will not provide services in those areas. That is the whole purpose and logic of having voluntary services.

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman is right. In many places community transport operators are filling gaps. In other places, they are providing local authorities with an affordable option to continue providing services to their communities.

As we emphasised in our report, the community transport sector has acted in good faith, in accordance with official guidance and with the acquiescence and encouragement of local and central Government over many years. The Minister must confirm today that he will take full account of the views and concerns expressed during the consultation. He must be clear about the next steps and the timetable for change. I would like to hear him talk about transitional arrangements, financial support and other mitigations. We have heard precious little about them so far. It would be unjust if even one socially valuable community transport service was lost in these circumstances. I fear the ultimate outcome, if the Government pushes ahead regardless of the concerns, could be far worse.

Philip Davies (in the Chair): I ask everyone who wants to speak to stand, so I can assess how many Members we have to squeeze in. To try to get everyone in, I will have to set a time limit to start with of three minutes.

1.53 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) on securing this debate and on her Select Committee's work in scrutinising the impact of the changes. It is right that this debate is taking place now, just after the Government have closed their consultation on the use of section 19 and section 22 permits.

I want to pass on the concerns that two community organisations in my constituency, Bungay Area Community Transport and Halesworth Area Community Transport, have raised with me. There are five issues I will draw attention to. The first is the disproportionate impact on smaller operators. BACT and HACT have advised me that should the proposals go through, they will have to close.

My second point—the hon. Lady did refer to this—is that community transport generally complements, rather than competes with, commercial operators. BACT and HACT have made that point to me. There is a view that the Government are responding to the prompting of a small number of vocal commercial operators that are not representative of the commercial sector as a whole.

My third point is that there is a risk of a domino effect. If one service is closed, it can cascade all the way down through local economies, with redundancies, staff reductions, day centres closing, market towns having even more problems and banks having yet another excuse to close their branches.

My fourth point is that local and national Government have supported the sector for decades, and there is a very good reason for that: it is the best way of plugging

this particular hole and meeting this existing demand. If the changes go through, I fear that Government will just have to come up with an alternative arrangement, in effect reinventing the wheel.

My final point is about the social and community role that these organisations provide. I will give one example that BACT brought to my attention. Mr and Mrs X are both disabled with walking difficulties, and Mr X has Parkinson's. They live in a remote rural village and have no family close by. They make use of BACT's car service for medical appointments, its dial-a-ride service to get them to the shops and its rural bus service once a week to get to the market town. They would be totally isolated without BACT, and they would probably be forced to leave their family home. In that context, I ask the Government to pause, go back and review the system, which has operated in this country—it is a British way of doing things—and should be allowed to continue.

1.56 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I strongly endorse the comments of the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), on the potentially enormous impact of these retrograde and unnecessary changes, which will affect hundreds of thousands of people with mobility difficulties.

I should start by declaring an interest. Eighteen months ago, I took on the role of chair of the HCT Group, which I think is the UK's largest social enterprise. It runs a large number of buses, but also a large number of community transport operations. It is not affected by the changes, because its drivers are already fully compliant with the new standards, but it has deep knowledge of the industry and totally shares the assessment of the Community Transport Association that the changes will do truly enormous damage.

I mention HCT at the outset because it is a social enterprise, and I get a strong sense that the Department simply does not understand the concept of a social enterprise. It seems to believe that a commercial service has to be provided by a commercial operator, but very efficient commercial services are provided by social enterprises that operate efficiently, but make a different use of their profit. The profit is used for a social purpose, not the reward of shareholders, and that distinction appears to be completely ignored in the Department's evaluation.

I will make two specific points. The first relates to the social impact assessment. Frankly, the Department has done a shoddy piece of work. As the Chair of the Select Committee points out, some fundamental costs are completely ignored. The transport management cost in the industry is underestimated by a factor of three. Most seriously of all, there is a well-developed methodology that people in the industry understand for calculating social impacts. Those are not fully taken into account. The figure of £400 million that the Chair of the Select Committee mentioned is well attested by the people who use the standard methodology.

My second point is on the legal issues. It appears that in every other sector of the economy—local or national—there is now an understanding that the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 can be applied on top of procurement rules, but an exception has been made in this case. What has happened here—it has happened

many times in the past over procurement issues—is that officials and lawyers are over-interpreting European Union laws. I encountered that in Government as a Secretary of State, dealing with the Department for Transport over the procurement of railways. Fortunately, the then Secretary of State for Transport—now the Chancellor—listened, changed it, and we had a much more pragmatic approach. We are asking today for a much more practical, pragmatic response, which recognises the real social need in the sector.

1.59 pm

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): I will make two distinct points, because of the pressure from the amount of people who want to speak. I understand why the Minister felt he had to do this, but I hope that after listening to the debate—to the words of the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), and the leader of the Liberals, the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable)—he takes on board the very strong feelings, across parties, on this issue.

I first tabled a private Member's Bill to get bus-fuel duty rebate for community transport back in 1999, because before then the sector was not getting the same kind of rebate as the commercial sector, and I thought that was unfair. When I introduced that private Member's Bill, the Government prevented it from going any further, but in due course they did bring in a BSOG—bus service operators grant—arrangement for community transport.

When I was Secretary of State for Transport I was fortunate enough to set up a scheme to help the smaller community transport agencies to get new buses. They fulfil a vital role, particularly in rural areas, but also in wider urban areas. I have three community transport agencies in my constituency. To give some idea of the work that Bakewell and Eyam Community Transport did over the past year, it has told me:

“Over the last 12 months we transported over 86,000 passengers which included 8270 wheelchair users and 3525 health related journeys”.

The agency served more than 397 groups, including Age UK, the scouts, Church groups and Women's Institutes—the list goes on. Bakewell and Eyam Community Transport fulfils a very important role in rural areas.

I am concerned that the proposals have made a number of charitable organisations unnecessarily concerned that they will not be able to continue that work. I would like to see more flexibility. The Minister needs to reflect on the debate, as I am sure he will, and look at what he can do to assist community transport.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) said, this is just a matter of law. The new regulation is either a correct implementation of European Union law, or it is not. Which is it?

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I will leave that to the Minister to answer; I am sure he will want to answer that. I fear that this issue has been around for some time. It is obviously everybody's view, including that of other speakers, that the Government have gone too far in responding to what was European Union regulation. After all, the Government believe in deregulating, not

[Sir Patrick McLoughlin]

excessive regulation. Perhaps the Minister would like to tell us about all the regulations he will get rid of, because for every regulation he introduces he is supposed to get rid of two.

As we can see, the proposals would lead to a lot of extra regulations that should not be introduced. I hope that the Minister takes note of the debate, and comes forward with a solution that allows community transport to carry on doing the vital job it has done, and that removes the question mark that many community transport agencies feel hangs over them at the moment.

2.3 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), the Chair of the Select Committee, for summarising a powerful case, which many Members across the House support. I also thank community transport providers operating in my constituency of Easington. In particular, I thank Angela Kent, the operations manager of East Durham Community Transport, who kindly contacted me and briefed me in advance of today's debate.

As has been pointed out, community transport is a vital lifeline for many people, especially elderly and vulnerable people at risk of social isolation and exclusion. My constituency is semi-rural, and the quality of local bus services for many people is nothing short of lamentable. If commuters in London had to put up with the quality of public transport services operating in my constituency, there would be protests on the streets. The regulated, integrated, frequent and modern public transport network that is standard for the capital city is a million miles removed from the experience of my constituents. Communities such as South Hetton, Haswell, Haswell Plough, Hesleden, High Hesleden and Hutton Henry can be left isolated, with an infrequent, sub-standard bus service that does not operate in the evenings.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that the impact assessments conducted by the Department for Transport underestimate the impact of the proposals on very vulnerable people? The impact assessments led us to believe that the impact would be minimal.

Grahame Morris: That is a really important point; I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. The problem is that, as a consequence of the regulations, people will be denied access to local amenities, leisure facilities and employment opportunities. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South indicated the cost—some £400 million.

People are rightly angry and frustrated about the implications of the changes. I am angry about the quality of the transport infrastructure in my constituency, and this will simply compound that. The proposed guidance from the Government implies that community transport providers need to show that they are not blocking commercial operators that may wish to deliver a local service on a particular route—the section 19 and 22 recommendations that have been mentioned. However, community transport is plugging the gaps of a failing commercial network. The ongoing withdrawal

of commercial bus services means that the community transport sector as a whole has gained growing importance in filling transport gaps, particularly in largely rural areas such as mine. Many voluntary transport services are financially fragile, and rely on donations and the goodwill of volunteers to continue.

The Government must realise that community transport is about so much more than simply moving people from A to B. It brings people together, teaches people new skills, makes disabled and elderly people in rural areas less socially isolated, improves physical and mental health, and makes communities pull together to tackle many issues that they face on a daily basis.

I share the reservations of community transport providers in my constituency that the Department for Transport, sitting in splendid isolation in offices in central London, may find it difficult to comprehend the service and support provided by community transport. I share the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South that the narrow and legalistic approach that the Government are adopting to community transport is like using a sledgehammer to crack a nut.

2.7 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) on securing the debate.

As I reflected when I led a Westminster Hall debate on this issue back in December 2015, community transport occupies a unique central ground between the passenger transport industry and the voluntary sector, providing innovative solutions to the otherwise unmet transport needs of local residents. Figures suggest that Erewash Community Transport alone generates £1.3 million of social value for the communities in which it operates. We all agree on the importance of these types of transport services run for and by our community, so the changes made to the guidance with regard to section 19 and 22 permit holding organisations are particularly concerning.

The problem appears to have arisen as an unintended consequence of what is, in my opinion, poor EU regulation, rather than any specific action taken by Her Majesty's Government. Where operators such as Erewash Community Transport are affected, Ministers have announced that they are making £250,000 available to help to fund advice for those drivers requiring a public service vehicle licence. Ministers have also issued new guidance to the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency to ensure that a proportionate approach is taken to enforcement for operators who demonstrate that they are working towards that compliance. I accept that this situation is far from ideal, but from conversations that I have had with the Minister, it is evident that the Government are doing everything they can within the scope of the law to mitigate this issue.

As part of the Select Committee's evidence-gathering process, it heard oral evidence from the chair of Erewash Community Transport, Mr Frank Phillips. Although I cannot say that Frank and I always see eye to eye on everything, as he also serves as a local Labour councillor, we have a shared passion for the community transport sector and agree with members of the Transport Committee that the social value of what these organisations do in

providing essential community-based transport services to vulnerable people who would otherwise suffer isolation is paramount. I am confident that the Minister shares that view and would urge him to continue in his efforts to negate the negative impact of the revised directive and to look at what further steps his Department can take to ensure the continued success of a sector that benefits my constituents in Erewash, as well as the wider community as a whole.

2.10 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I must admit that I always associate you more with a column in the *Yorkshire Post* than a pillar of the establishment, but it is a pleasure to be here today.

I congratulate the Chair of the Transport Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), on what is a model of a good Select Committee report. It is investigative and thorough. It has called witnesses, including the Minister and Mr Phillips and Mr Allen, who have been mentioned. Above all, it has focused on the core problem—that there are two sections of the 1985 Act, which can be addressed.

Surely if the Government cannot make things better, they should at least endeavour not to make things worse. The extraordinary thing about the community transport model that we have in this country is that it is organic. It has grown and it did so—as a politician, it seems almost heretical for me to suggest such a thing—without our hand on the tiller. It grew organically from the community and has brought added value and so many different beneficial advantages.

We have not yet mentioned the volunteers. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) was a volunteer driver with the magnificent Ealing Community Transport, which my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South has visited—that was the high point of our career there. I should say Ealing Community Transport is the exemplar; the finest example; the industry standard; the diamond mark of community transport. It has volunteers and also takes people on as apprentices. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) has also visited it on many occasions.

There are many other factors that we simply do not have time to adumbrate today. There is the issue of cross-subsidy—we can cross-subsidise other beneficial community activities. There is also the fact that it can be an early-warning system. Very often, the drivers will identify a potential problem with somebody they are travelling with, and that is an early-warning system.

The absolute core of today's debate is that there is no comparator between commercial bus and transport organisations and the community transport sector. They are totally different beasts. The community transport sector should be nourished, cherished, respected and admired. I have no argument whatsoever with the commercial transport sector, but it has its end of the pitch and the community transport sector has its end. Let us allow for something that works, and which, in my part of the world, provides transport for police volunteers, cadets and so on and knits all those community groups together in a way that frankly were it to cease to operate would leave a dark and terrible vacuum in the heart of Ealing. I know you would not want to see that, Mr Davies. I am sure the Minister would agree.

2.13 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. In the short time available, I will make some brief points. Firstly, the implications of these changes for my community in Cheltenham are very significant. The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) just referred to volunteers, and Community Connexions in my constituency has 50. It makes 100,000 passenger journeys a year, with 13,000 passenger trips to day centres and 5,000 trips to health appointments. As one example, we have a fantastic facility near Cheltenham called the Butterfly Garden, which provides education, therapy and recreation for people with disabilities, and the commercial providers simply do not want a contract to serve that fantastic facility.

If I may say so, from this side of the fence, is this not paradigmatic of David Cameron's big society? It is about using corporate receipts to maximise community benefit. *[Interruption.]* I knew that would rile up Opposition Members, but it is true. We should be doing everything possible and straining every sinew to support these fantastic organisations.

In my constituency, Community Connexions is now having to consider winding up the organisation because of the cost of getting an operator's licence—some £26,000. It does not know whether its application to get a licence will then be challenged by the Bus and Coach Association or whether commercial operators will pursue loss leaders to try to drive them out of business.

In its briefing for this debate, the Community Transport Association said, quite fairly:

“We understand that this action does not result from policy decision within government, and our sense is that they would rather not be doing this.”

That is fair and right. We have to recognise, as has already been indicated, that the issue derives from an EU regulation from 2009 that came into force in 2011. Therefore, the implication of the Government's position must be that we have collectively misinterpreted the law during that time, which leads me to think that the law is moot—it is arguable.

The question about what non-commercial purposes means must be a matter for legitimate legal debate. Should it cover the organisation, as has already been intimated, or simply the specific contract? We are a nation of laws and we comply with the law—that is one of the most solemn undertakings of any British Government—but where the law is arguable, there is a duty on those community providers who do so much good in our society and in our constituencies to take up those arguments, to deploy them to the fullest extent and, if necessary, to litigate and test them. It is only where the case is unanswerable that we should be taking the necessary action.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: Would my hon. Friend agree that it is not unknown for Governments to gold-plate European regulations and that, quite often, that is at the instigation of commercial organisations, which do not have terribly strong objections to costs and burdens being placed on rivals? Does he not think that the Department's interpretation of this regulation being applied, for example, to non-profit-making organisations with unpaid voluntary drivers, providing services that no commercial operator is actually trying to get, should

[Mr Kenneth Clarke]

be seriously questioned by the Minister? Perhaps he should challenge the rather pedantic nature of the legal advice that he has received.

Alex Chalk: As always, my right hon. and learned Friend presents the point extremely powerfully. My concern is that it is not so much about gold-plating the EU regulation as it is about being excessively cautious in its interpretation. There is a role here for the Government to take a robust line. With any litigation there is the risk of failure and I recognise that, but there is an overwhelming public interest and, just as importantly, a powerful and legitimate legal argument for taking this on, and I would urge the Government to do so.

2.17 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): As a member of the Transport Committee, I have already had my say in this report, so I will be brief. Community transport is a vital lifeline for people in the far south-west, both in rural areas across Devon and Cornwall and in big cities such as Plymouth and Exeter. In my own patch, Access Plymouth has been in touch. It is a superb community transport provider that is very concerned about these changes.

My concerns were echoed in the report. The Transport Committee set out some very clear concerns about section 19 and 22 permits, highlighted the fact that the decisions taken by the DFT may have been taken with best interests in mind, but have been done so in a haphazard way. The Committee set out a very clear set of recommendations that the Government should follow in order to mitigate these circumstances. I am very disappointed that that has not happened. The DFT's management of the sector has been confused and needs proper clarification. I hoped that the Committee's report would provide the basis for that clarification of the rationale, so I hope this debate will help give new energy to Ministers.

Local authorities are now following very different rules. They are confused and are making very different decisions, which are disadvantaging not only community transport providers but the communities that rely on them. Our recommendations were clear but have not been followed and the changes have now been enacted very differently by local authority providers across the country and by different community transport providers, which are trying to interpret a very complex legal structure in a way they have not before.

The timing of our Transport Committee report was deliberate. Concerns were raised, the Committee communicated them clearly, and the DFT had the window to correct the problem before long-term damage was caused to the community transport sector. I fear that the window of opportunity has now closed. The consequences of the DFT's inaction is that community transport providers are shedding volunteers and vehicles, and are reducing the service they offer to some of the most vulnerable people in the country, including disabled and elderly people, who desperately need community transport provision to help them get around their communities.

There is a real risk that, unless the Government act, the confusion caused by the DFT's action could sound the death knell for community transport as it is structured.

I ask the Minister please to re-read the Transport Committee's recommendations, listen to the experience of community transport providers, and act swiftly before any more damage is done to the sector.

2.20 pm

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) on her Committee's report and on her excellent speech. There is a reason why the Transport Act 1985 set out a reasonable but relatively light-touch regulatory regime for community transport services, which, as hon. Members have made clear, provide services to address a commercially unmet need in our communities. They get people to hospital, GP appointments and the shops, and they generally help people to live a normal, active life by taking them from door to door with a caring, local service.

In my semi-rural constituency of Charnwood, the Syston and District Volunteer Centre, which provides volunteer drivers in cars and minibuses, plays a huge role in supporting the community. It is well run and financially in a good place, but there is the risk that what is proposed in the consultation could unintentionally harm it.

My very real concern is that successive Governments over many decades, having not incrementally tweaked the regulations in the 1985 Act where necessary, have led us to a place where, under legal pressure, the Government have to consult on some remedial measures and risk adopting a legalistic and potentially unduly onerous interpretation of the regulations. As the hon. Lady said, it is very much a sledgehammer to crack a nut. In seeking to address the issue of legal compliance, they might unintentionally have a much wider-ranging impact on this hugely valued sector.

As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) highlighted, the legal point—the definition and interpretation of “non-commercial”—is important. Getting the right legal advice is important. With two lawyers in the Chamber—with all due respect to my right hon. and learned Friend and his colleagues—we may well get at least three, if not four, legal opinions. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) was right that this should be tested in the court.

I echo my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin)—as a former Secretary of State, he has probably forgotten more about this issue than any of us in this Chamber will ever know about it—in urging the Minister, who is a reasonable and decent man, to reflect again on the proposal, to show flexibility and pragmatism in his approach, and to ensure that the consultation looks not just at delivering a legal fix but at addressing the broader policy context and delivering a vibrant community transport sector for the future.

2.23 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) on her report, her speech and her excellent stewardship of the Transport Committee.

Community transport is not the sexiest subject on the political agenda. It was never in “The West Wing”. When people think about transport, they think of things

such as Crossrail, HS2 and the third runway—all of which are in my constituency, I have to say. However, as many hon. Members have pointed out, community transport gives people a lifeline.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) described Ealing community transport at length, and he has nicked most of my speech. He and I were both at the Christmas party of Age Link, which provides a similar service: volunteer drivers in their own cars, not minibuses, take isolated and lonely elderly people to appointments. In Ealing, we also have Dial-a-Ride—Transport for London is the main provider—which is another door-to-door service, with red buses.

The distinctive green and yellow ECT buses, which my hon. Friend described, are testament to how things work in Ealing and elsewhere in the country, and they illustrate why changing these regulations is so dangerous. I spent a recent Friday with ECT, and we picked up a lady called Suzie. Hon. Members have talked about their rural seats, but even in suburban Acton we picked up someone who had had a fall and has been unable to drive since then, and we took her to Morrisons. She said that the service is a godsend. It has been going for nearly 40 years and serves 298 groups—not just the elderly and disabled, but various scout groups, youth groups and every complexion of religious group from the Jehovah's Witnesses to various mosques. ECT provides services that are not available in the commercial transport sector, and not just to the elderly—a group we seem to have been addressing today. In my list of groups I have written the YMCA, which has “young” in it. ECT serves young groups, old groups, Dementia Concern, Age Concern—those sorts of people.

These services save our local authorities a huge amount of money in avoided health and social care costs, which is the biggest bill for all local authorities at the moment. In the long run, they save us money. In January, the Government introduced a Minister for loneliness. Community transport providers tap into the loneliness agenda. There are also quantifiable figures: Deloitte estimates that the loneliness bill is £1.3 billion to £2.9 billion for the whole country. It is £10 million for Ealing alone, but with community transport it comes down to £4 million a year.

We have heard about the strangulating definition of European regulations. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South described how the 1985 light-touch regulation turned into the scary notifications of 31 July and 9 November, so I will not go into all that—

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order.

2.26 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) on securing this important and extremely timely debate.

I declare an interest: I am the chairman of the all-party group on community transport, which is backed and whose secretariat is provided by the Community Transport Association. Many hon. Members here are members; those who are not are very welcome to join. This is far more important than simply a parliamentary matter. In my constituency, I have four excellent community service providers—Our Bus Bartons, West Oxfordshire Community

Transport, Volunteer Link-Up and the Villager—and they are all thriving. Only last week, I opened a new bus as it was handed over to the Villager service. Those services are all terrified about the impact of the Department's proposed actions under the consultation.

I am very grateful to the Minister, who is very interested in this area. He has visited Our Bus Bartons with me, listened in person to the concerns and spent a great deal of time listening to my volunteers in person. I know he is concerned about this issue and he is doing his best, but there is an extraordinary problem here. The reason why all those volunteer-led services exist is that commercial providers have withdrawn. Is it not an extraordinary perversity that, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) said, under pressure from commercial providers, which do not want to operate in these areas, it may be difficult or impossible for such volunteer-led services to run?

We have heard some excellent speeches today. I just want to mention a couple of the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe. I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), but there are in fact three barristers here.

Edward Argar: We will get six opinions!

Robert Courts: My hon. Friend says we will get six opinions—I am sorry all the barristers are agreeing with each other.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham is absolutely right that there is clearly space for interpreting the law here, and that is exactly what we have to do. The sections 19 and 22 system, which has existed for so long, is a classically British compromise. It has created a benign environment under which community transport can operate. It is essential that we continue to go through the regulation and the law with a fine-toothed comb. Simply put, we cannot allow a situation to arise in which community transport providers are not able to operate.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman join me in thanking all the groups across our county that do this, and especially Christopher Gowers from Wolvercote? Many of them cross our constituency boundaries, because our communities are interwoven.

Robert Courts: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I mentioned Our Bus Bartons, which from my constituency runs a service to not only the Banbury constituency but Oxford Parkway railway station. It provides vital links, not just to stations but to doctors' surgeries, for people to go shopping or for young people to go to work. The impact and essential value of the services simply cannot be overstated. She made that point very clear.

I, too, thank all the volunteers, without whom the services would not run. They put an incredible amount of effort into ensuring that when commercial services were withdrawn, communities could step in and fill the breach. We must make sure that that can continue to happen.

Rural isolation is a real challenge for any of us who represent a rural area, and I know that the Government are combating it and worried about it. That is another essential reason for community transport to continue.

[Robert Courts]

I gave a full response to the consultation, in which I made some of the more technical points that I do not have time to make now. I urge the Minister to engage with the all-party parliamentary group and all of us, because we want to help. We must find a way through to ensure that community transport can continue to thrive, as it has done so far.

2.30 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Davies. On behalf of the third party, I associate myself and my colleagues with the Transport Committee presentation and the speech of its Chair, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), in support of the general thrust of our discussion today.

We cannot overstate the gratitude that we should express to the many hundreds of organisations throughout the country that provide a community transport service and, in particular, to the many thousands of volunteers who are involved in the boards of the charities, running the services and, often, sitting at the wheel to provide the service itself. Such people are the dedicated community heroes whom we should be lauding, saluting and encouraging. I suggest that the role of Government is to nurture, enable and give support to people who want to provide that service in their community, so I regret that we seem to have got ourselves into a situation in which this Department for Transport consultation exercise leaves many of those people devalued and in many ways frightened about the future of the service in which they are engaged.

In my own city of Edinburgh, we have a very good community transport service. There are five main providers operating in a public sector partnership with the local authority. In my constituency, the South Edinburgh Amenities Group and Lothian Community Transport Services provide an excellent service, which is not just a matter of transporting people from A to B. The whole nature of the service, and the rationale behind it, is that it provides a vital social and caring service to those people in our community who need it. We cannot overstate the importance of the service in preventing and overcoming the social isolation that many people would otherwise feel. The service is vital not just in providing material and physical help to people, but in allowing them to live their lives more fully and better than would otherwise be the case.

Community transport is a service provided at an individual level, and it gets to the places that normal transport does not or cannot reach. Quite often, that involves getting people not only to the door but through the door, with physical assistance for people to get into vehicles—something that normal operators simply could not provide.

I am very disturbed about the process that is under way. There is some confused thinking going on, particularly in the attempt to redefine, after all these years, the notion of the word “commercial”. To suggest that simply by virtue of the fact that money is paid to a service—irrespective of who is paying it and who is receiving it—an operation is rendered commercial seems to me to turn on its head what most normal, right-thinking people believe to be a commercial operation. A commercial operation, for most people, is one in which an operator

engages in supplying a service in order to make a profit. That is the normal meaning of “commercial”. Organisations that do that explicitly not for profit should not be regarded as commercial, and they should be exempted from the requirements of sections 19 and 22 on that basis alone.

Even more bizarre is the suggestion that it will be for a private operator to decide whether we apply the exemption—only when a private operator says that it might be interested in running the service will the community transport operator be obliged to go into the new licensing regime. I find that bizarre. We could have a situation in which, on the one hand, a community transport operator is regarded as commercial simply because it receives payment from the local authority or someone else for providing the service and, on the other hand, it could be exempted and be non-commercial on the grounds of there being no private sector interest. At one and the same time, the operator could be both commercial and non-commercial. That is a policy of which Schrodinger would be proud, but it ought to have no part in the planning of public transport.

We must also understand the effect. If the proposal goes ahead, many community transport operators will be faced with higher costs as they try to fit in with a licensing regime that they did not have previously. More importantly, a lot of the volunteers who run such organisations will simply say, “This isn’t why we got into this. We didn’t go into it to be a commercial operator or to operate on this basis”, and they will simply give up. We will see a collapse in community transport organisation providers, and that will leave a gap in the service, driving up the cost to the local authority or anyone else who needs to provide the service.

Stephen Pound: Many volunteer drivers would be extremely put off by having to undergo all the onerous training to get the additional certification. Many people will simply walk away if they are required to get all that additional certification. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Tommy Sheppard: I could not agree more. That is another reason for that effect of the policy—if we oblige community transport operators to jump through the new hoops and the red tape, many people will simply say, “Well, that’s not what I want to do. I want to serve my community. I don’t want to do this.” The Department ought to be responsive to that.

I have a couple of final observations. First, I cannot be the only person to find it bizarre that the suggested rationale for why this is happening now is a sudden desire by some officials in the Department to comply better with the regulations of the European Union. We are, after all, only 47 weeks away from being led out of the European Union by this Government, whereby they hope to free themselves from the shackles imposed on them by just such European Union regulations and many others. Why the sudden outbreak of Europhilia, at the 11th hour of our membership of the European Union? It does not add up. It is probably a smokescreen for some other agenda going on in the Department.

Secondly—I know I am the only Scottish MP present—as I researched for the debate and read around the issue, I have to confess that I realised that the situation in my city is bizarre. The roads along which the community minibus travels are regulated and paid for by the Scottish Government; the people inside the bus are being taken

to health and social care facilities that are regulated and legislated for by the Scottish Government; and yet the Scottish Government have no oversight of whether the operator should have a licence to drive the bus. That seems to me to be something of an inadequacy in the devolution settlement. I hope that next time we review the competencies of the devolved Administrations we consider some more joined-up thinking in that regard, so that the settlement is at least internally consistent, and all aspects of public policy can be integrated.

I have attended many of these Westminster Hall debates and usually they are much more collegiate than exchanges in the main Chamber. However, I do not think I have yet seen one in which there is this degree of unanimity in the views expressed by Members right across the House. The Minister is an admirable fellow, and I know that his fingerprints are not on this particular consultation. He now has a golden opportunity to rein in his Department, to say “Stop!” to whoever is driving this policy, and to recognise in public policy and Government action the importance and uniqueness of community transport providers the length and breadth of this country.

2.39 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Davies.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) and I congratulate her on securing this important debate and on her excellent speech outlining the issue. Her knowledge and expertise on all transport matters is of great benefit to the House, and I commend her work as Chair of the Transport Committee in carrying out this important and thorough inquiry. I also thank hon. Members from across the House for their contributions.

We have heard that community transport is a very broad term for the vital local transport services that provide a lifeline to people in our communities who, sadly, might otherwise be isolated. From lifts by volunteer car drivers to more organised schemes such as dial-a-ride or dial-a-bus, minibus travel for groups of people who struggle to get out on their own and community bus services where there are no existing commercial routes, such as in remote rural areas, not-for-profit services are vital to local communities.

Dr Huq: My hon. Friend mentioned that community transport is a lifeline for the users, but does he agree that it is also a lifeline for the volunteer drivers? Patrick O’Keefe, a constituent who was very high up at Heathrow, and Paul Hurley, who is ex-BBC, love it because they have a post-retirement second lease of life.

Matt Rodda: My hon. Friend makes a very valid point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South and other Members are right to describe the services as a lifeline, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) just did. It is heartening to see so many Members here showing support for them. Throughout the debate, we have heard many examples of the impact that these vital services have in constituencies up and down the country. The value of these services is not disputed and is not a topic for this debate.

The debate came about as a result of the failure of the Department for Transport to ensure that UK legislation and guidance kept pace with community transport practice

and European regulations. Sadly, the Department did not respond appropriately or quickly enough to address issues that were raised directly with them over a number of years. When officials did respond, they mismanaged the situation, causing confusion and panic in the community transport sector. We have heard that the Department’s ill-judged letter last July had an immediate and damaging knock-on effect. It led to local authorities halting commissioning and in some cases even withdrawing contracts from community transport operators. The delay of more than three months in the Department providing clarification further exacerbated the problem and highlighted the Department’s lack of understanding of the impact of its proposals on the community transport sector.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South informed us earlier that the Transport Committee’s subsequent inquiry was launched in response to the concerns that not-for-profit community minibus services for vulnerable or isolated people were under threat, and in response to Members being contacted by constituents and community transport providers. The inquiry received more than 300 submissions, which demonstrates the considerable strength of feeling among organisations that provide community transport and people using those vital services.

The inquiry found that the Government’s position—that the majority of community transport operators would not be affected by any clarification of the rules—was inaccurate. The Department’s view appears not to differentiate between true commercial services and those vital community services that fill gaps where the market is unable to deliver transport. By accepting a premise that any transaction in any form makes something commercial, the proposed changes will prevent many more community organisations from operating than the Department intended, affecting not just those that compete for contracts. It is important to remember that not all services where a payment is made are truly commercial.

If the proposed guidance stands, the total estimated impact on community organisations will be about £399 million. That will mean that many of the not-for-profit organisations will no longer be able to afford to run their services, as we have heard from many Members. That is a fundamental and worrying shift away from the established policy that not-for-profit organisations are able to play an important role, which has been supported by legislation and encouraged by both Labour and Conservative Governments for nearly 30 years. This long-established arrangement has been successful and has ensured that people in our communities can still get about when public transport cannot support them. That is why, in its inquiry report, the Transport Committee urged the Government to engage with the sector, and called for Ministers to address the Department’s lack of understanding of the community transport sector and to carry out a full impact assessment of the proposals.

A further key recommendation was that the Government use the consultation to consider reforms to achieve compatibility with EU regulations. That would maintain the key objective of continuing to provide high quality, safe and secure community transport services. It is disheartening to hear from my hon. Friend that the Government have not listened and, sadly, not engaged with these very legitimate concerns. With the consultation now closed, I hope the Minister will outline the steps he will take to ensure the views and concerns expressed are

[*Matt Rodda*]

taken into account, and will reassure Members that the consultation was not merely an exercise to rubber-stamp the Department's proposals.

The community transport sector has acted in good faith, in accordance with official guidance from both local and central Government over many years. By its own admission, the DFT has not kept pace with developments in community transport. Furthermore, the Department has taken action only when under immediate legal threat. Will the Minister now outline what steps he is taking to ensure that the Department has the expertise and understanding required to oversee the reforms, whilst ensuring the protection of these vital services? The role of the DFT is to support transport networks and to keep people moving.

This sorry episode suggests a wider failure to take a strategic view of local transport policy, which I hope the Minister will now address. I urge him to take a fresh look at community transport services, to improve services and make them more efficient. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments and to him reassuring the Committee on this matter.

2.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): You are an adornment to the Chair, Mr Davies, and it is a delight to see you there. I am very grateful to colleagues across the House for taking the time to take part in the debate. I recognise that the reason they do that is because of the strength of feeling of individuals across political parties on this vital sector. I am delighted to have the opportunity to respond to the questions that have been put and the Committee report that has been produced.

I will start by saying that far from it being the case that Government have not started to listen, as the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) said, we have been very carefully listening all the way through this process. As Members were standing up, I found myself wondering how many of their specific organisations I had myself visited. They include Community Connexions in Cheltenham, the community transport business in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) and Hackney Community Transport. My officials have visited other community transport organisations. That is because, as colleagues have said—it was put beautifully by the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) and by many other colleagues across the House—they are vital community organisations.

It was right to recognise, as several Members did, that the organisations in many ways are not entirely distinct but often highly different in their nature from purely commercial operators. That is because the services they offer are often incidental to the wider public good that they discharge and the wider social value that they add. I see this in Herefordshire: we have the city of Hereford but we also have rural lands. I acknowledge the value of community transport. That is why this Government and their predecessors have supported community transport organisations.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) was right to highlight the fact that those organisations had been supported by

the bus service operators grants—BSOG—and by the minibus grant scheme that we have in operation. Hundreds of organisations up and down the country have benefited from both schemes. We recognise the importance of the sector.

This consultation is, and was always designed to be, a consultation in the full sense. The Government do not have a formulated and final policy on this matter. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), who is a thoroughly distinguished lawyer in this area, pointed out—as others with legal practice experience have acknowledged—that the law in this area is a complex matter on which our understanding continues to evolve. Part of the purpose of the consultation is to understand how the law plays out in community transport organisations' practice across the country.

Lilian Greenwood: I am very pleased that the Minister gave the assurance that he is listening and that he has been to visit operators. Will he explain what he intends to do in response? Will he consider alternative interpretations of that EU regulation? Is he prepared to think again in response to the results of that consultation, rather than the explanation that was given in the consultation, which seemed to take a very legalistic approach with no room for manoeuvre?

Jesse Norman: I will come to the full thrust of what the hon. Lady said later, but let me respond to that point. We will pursue the consultation process, reflect on the experience that comes out of that, publish a response to the consultation and take action based on that, which is exactly what Members would expect of the Government. We do not believe that we should proceed without listening to people or taking account of what they say.

This was a consultation in the full sense of the word. It was not just about listening to local community transport organisations and their wider representative organisations throughout the country, but about gathering evidence. As I think my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales mentioned, when he ran the Department the Government had relatively little information about this area and there was a certain lack of legal clarity. I only wish that I had his flexibility in that regard, but the point of the consultation has been to gather information as well as to take soundings from operators.

Stephen Pound: I understand where the Minister is coming from, but does he realise that, by not clarifying the situation, he has not given any signal of hope to the community transport sector? It is suffering, and the corrosive impact of last year's famous letter is causing it pain. We will not have a community transport sector unless he makes it clear here and now that the Government support it.

Jesse Norman: I can only respect the hon. Gentleman's astonishing capacity to manufacture indignation.

Stephen Pound: It wasn't manufactured!

Jesse Norman: I feel the same concern as him and, if he allows me to proceed, I will be happy to give a reassurance about that. In fact, let me bring that section

of my speech forward. We have said this in the past, but let me say again on the record that our judgment is that it would be premature for local authorities to withhold contracts pending further analysis and exploration of the legal complexities involved in this area. I cannot be clearer than that, and I hope that is reassuring to the sector, as it should be.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): In which case, will the Minister write to local authorities instructing them to be helpful towards the community transport sector? The responses from local transport authorities around the country have been very variable.

Jesse Norman: We continue to consult local authorities. We will pursue the current consultation, which has been very full and wide-ranging, and then publish the results on that matter—properly considered and legally advised—in due course. I will say, though, that local authorities should heed the words I have just said and take a large degree of comfort from them for existing practice.

Mr Jenkin: Will the Minister give way very briefly?

Jesse Norman: I have taken a lot of interventions and I have a lot of stuff to get through, but of course—if my hon. Friend is very quick.

Mr Jenkin: I am most grateful. In the final analysis, the Minister's legal advisers are there to advise; they do not instruct him. I advise him to get alternative legal advice from outside his Department, because Government legal advice tends to be a little over-cautious, which is why we finish up gold-plating these things. It is tempting just to blame the European Union.

Jesse Norman: Well, there were moments when colleagues sounded very much like Brexiteers in their rejection of this piece of EU legislation. There has been no undue deference to legal advice on this matter. We are considering it and consulting widely on this topic. We remain very open to legal advice. The hon. Member for Nottingham South has not clarified, in response to the question from my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), whether her Committee took legal advice. If it did, we would welcome its sharing and publishing it. I say to all colleagues around the House and to representative organisations that we would be very grateful to receive any legal advice or opinions they have. This is a matter of some legal complexity, and we are interested in hearing those views. The point was rightly made that aspects of social value in other legislation need to be taken account of, too.

I hope that it is understood that we as a Department are taking a tone of warmth towards the sector on this issue, while respecting our obligation to uphold and clarify the law. I very much offer community transport operators and colleagues reassurance about that. It is important to realise that there are genuine questions here about what the law is, how it relates to other aspects of law and how it is properly applied. We recognise that, and it is important to place that on the record, too.

Local authorities have not been much mentioned, except by me when I clarified that they should not withhold contracts until further clarification is given, but they are a very important part of this equation. As part of our further work during the follow-up to the

consultation, my officials and I will talk closely with local authorities to think about best practice for how they commission services in this area and to encourage them to a proper understanding of the legal position as we see it.

In the few minutes I have left—I want to allow the hon. Member for Nottingham South a chance to respond—let me make a couple of comments on colleagues' remarks. I think the hon. Lady is caught in a slight dilemma. She rightly praised the light-touch, affordable regime that successive Governments have adopted for the sector, which has been allowed to evolve of its own accord in a very big society way. I was grateful for the triumphant praise for the big society from the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound). He was absolutely right about that. He did not quite bring himself to say those words, but of course that is what he was doing, like the good Tory he is. I hope he lasts in his party under those circumstances.

Stephen Pound: Withdraw!

Jesse Norman: Well, I offered my hope, but I am happy for the hon. Gentleman to contradict me if he wishes. The point is that the regime remains light-touch and affordable. That is precisely why the consultation was necessary—to gather information and understanding. It is misguided to suggest that we are adopting a narrow and legalistic approach when in fact we are proceeding with extreme care and caution in the face of a complex situation. As I said, I very much encourage the hon. Lady to place on the public record any legal advice that she has commissioned or received.

Lilian Greenwood: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Lady will have a chance to respond in about three minutes, so she can defend her position later if she wishes. I should say that I absolutely respect the Committee, which did extremely well to call this debate. That is a very important aspect of its work—it is an extension from when I was on the Treasury Committee and the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. I also have great respect for the Committee's report, as do my colleagues across the Department.

The question of whether there has been gold-plating here is a proper one. I am not persuaded that there has been. I say to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe, and others who think there may have been, that the consultation and the draft statutory instrument went through a process of discussion across Government, including at the Regulatory Policy Committee and other committees, the purpose of which is to prevent gold-plating and which reflects custom, practice and decisions made by many Ministers, and they passed that process. I do not believe there has been gold-plating, but we do not yet have a final, evolved position on this matter, so it would be a rush to judgment to take that view.

Let me close by saying that no one respects the importance of the community transport sector more than my officials and me. We have been up and down the country to talk to these organisations. My officials have covered every part of these British Isles and, indeed, the United Kingdom in an effort to understand the sector and to support it, as the Government have

[Jesse Norman]

historically. I give that sector, which I respect so much, my reassurance that we will continue to do whatever we can to protect and support it, subject to the process of law, in the coming months.

2.58 pm

Lilian Greenwood: I am pleased that the Minister recognises the strength of feeling about this issue among Members on both sides of the House who represent constituencies urban and rural across the UK. There cannot be many issues that unite the Father of the House, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, a Conservative former Secretary of State for Transport, three Select Committee Chairs, the Scottish National party and Labour spokespeople, and so many other learned hon. Members. We know the immense value of community transport. It meets unmet need, generates social value and provides a lifeline to people who may otherwise be cut off from friends, family, work, education, social activities and essential appointments by disability or geography.

The Minister must have misunderstood our report if he thinks we recommend a legalistic approach. We ask for exactly the opposite. In our report, we called on the Government to explore whether a more practical and pragmatic interpretation of the EU regulation is possible, and that has been added to today. If he is prepared to listen, think again and amend his proposals, he has an opportunity to avert disaster. I very much hope he takes it.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Channel 4 Relocation

[SIR GRAHAM BRADY *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the relocation of Channel 4.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Graham. Channel 4 is undoubtedly one of our finest, most precious broadcasting assets, as evidenced by the fact that there has been intense interest from many cities and regions across the United Kingdom in hosting its new national headquarters and new creative hubs, representing 300 new Channel 4 jobs, which will not only expand its footprint across the United Kingdom but deepen its relationship with viewers.

Rightly, Channel 4 has set a high bar for bidding cities and regions, requiring robust local infrastructure and transport and, in particular, frequent, fast and reliable connectivity. For the national headquarters, it is looking for a home with a population of at least 200,000, travel time to the city of London within three hours and a high level of physical and digital connectivity.

As a Glasgow Member of Parliament, I am sure right hon. and hon. Members will understand that I am immensely pleased to see that my home city is putting in a bold, strong and ambitious bid to be the new home of Channel 4. I am particularly pleased that the chair of that bid is the famous Glaswegian journalist and broadcaster Stuart Cosgrove. Beyond Channel 4's physical requirements, it is ultimately looking for somewhere it can feel at home. It is looking for a diverse city that has a thriving arts and production scene; a city that is not afraid to go against the grain; and a city that has a confident sense of itself but is always looking to stretch itself and take on new challenges. Setting aside the physical criteria, I wish to set out the case for Scotland's largest city. The truth is that if Channel 4 was a city, it would be the city of Glasgow.

Glasgow is not only Scotland's largest economy, generating more than £20 billion of economic output, but it has a growing population, standing now just shy of 600,000 citizens. Within that population, we have friends who have joined us from all four corners of the world. The well-established Chinese, Pakistani, Caribbean and African communities, along with many different European communities and other ethnic groups, proudly call Glasgow their home. It is important to note that those citizens who join us from other parts of the world are driving Glasgow's population growth.

I mentioned that Channel 4 is looking for a city of diversity. If Members will allow me, I will adumbrate some of what has happened in Glasgow that shows we are a diverse city. Let us remember that the city of Glasgow elected Britain's first ever Muslim Member of Parliament: Mohammad Sarwar, in 1997, as the Labour MP for Glasgow Govan. Similarly, the first ever Asian to be elected to the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, the late Bashir Ahmad, came from Glasgow. Scotland's first female First Minister—known, I suspect, to everyone in the Chamber—is a Glasgow politician. This week, we marked the life of the late Michael Martin, who was

the first ever Scottish and indeed Catholic Speaker of the House of Commons, and of course he was a Glasgow MP. If that was not enough, our Lord Provost—the first citizen of Glasgow—is herself from Sweden, making her the first EU national ever to hold that post.

Today is 10 May, and on 10 May 1994 Nelson Mandela became the first black President of South Africa. Glaswegians are particularly proud of the fact that Glasgow stood alone at the time in being the first city anywhere in the world to offer Nelson Mandela the freedom of the city. At that time, other cities were still condemning him as a terrorist. Sir Graham, you will know the fantastic tale of the South African consulate based in Glasgow. Our civic leaders, in their remarkable genius, changed the name of the street that the consulate was on to Nelson Mandela Place, so every piece of mail the consulate received had the name of that country's most famous prisoner on it.

As Mohammad Sarwar noted when he spent some time in this House, Glasgow also lays claim to being the place where chicken tikka masala was invented. Let us move on to more serious, timely matters.

When Syrians came to the United Kingdom, fleeing war, Glasgow was the first UK city to welcome them among us. Indeed, in 1999, when the then Labour Government brought in a policy of dispersal for asylum seekers to move them out of London and the south-east across the UK, Glasgow was the first city anywhere in the UK to sign up to the programme. All of us who represent Glasgow are proud that many of them still call our city their home.

It is no wonder that the English writer and raconteur Sir Compton Mackenzie said in his rectorial address to the University of Glasgow that when he gazed down on Glasgow from the Campsie Fells, it offered something that “neither Rome nor Athens” ever could: “the glory and grandeur of the future”.

He said Glasgow was
“the beating heart of a nation.”

Glasgow is home to a thriving creative arts and cultural scene. It is home to some of the best educational institutions in Europe, such as the University of Glasgow and Strathclyde University, supported by a network of colleges that is developing these communities even further.

There is an existing availability of talent in Glasgow that I have no doubt whatsoever would contribute enormously to the future of Channel 4. Of course, Channel 4 knows that, because it has been in Glasgow in some form or another for almost 30 years, working in partnership with some of our independent producers who have a reputation for being the best of the best in the business. All of the reasons that I have set out today and that have been outlined in a bold and ambitious bid document, led by Stuart Cosgrove, have led to an extraordinary display of political, geographical and cultural unity in getting behind Glasgow's bid to host Channel 4.

The bid has been backed by all the major political parties in Scotland. It is backed formally by the Scottish Government, by Scotland's tech city, the city of Dundee—home to Grand Theft Auto and the soon-to-be-opening V&A—and, of course, by Scotland's capital city and home of the Scottish festival, the city of Edinburgh. I cannot tell you, Sir Graham, what an achievement it is to unite Glasgow and Edinburgh on almost anything.

Undoubtedly, one of Glasgow's most precious assets—if not the most precious asset—is its people. Known the world over for our good humour and welcoming spirit, we have often punched above our weight on the international stage. That was displayed perfectly four years ago at the 2014 Commonwealth games, and no doubt it will be on display again this summer as we host the 2018 European championships.

Glasgow, of course, was once known as the second city of the empire, but the days of empire are gone, no matter how much some in this House might wish they were not. They are behind us. Glasgow has not stopped cutting a new image for itself over many decades, built up by some of our most famous sons and daughters, from the footballing legend Alex Ferguson—I am sure all Members will join me in wishing him a speedy recovery—to the comedy legend Billy Connolly, the musical talents of Amy Macdonald and bands such as Texas and, let us not forget, the only Scot that many people around the world will know, Groundskeeper Willie from the cartoon, “The Simpsons”.

There is a whole generation of young, talented and yet undiscovered Glaswegians who are waiting to make their mark on the world stage. My advice is that Channel 4 should snap them up now. They can be part of Channel 4's future, and Channel 4 would be a welcome part of Glasgow's future. Glasgow is a city that is constantly on the up, and constantly challenging itself. It is a city that is forever changing for the better, and a better home Channel 4 simply could not find.

3.11 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on securing this Backbench debate.

When launching “4 All the UK”, the chief executive of Channel 4, Alex Mahon, said:

“As a public service broadcaster with diversity in its DNA, Channel 4 has a unique ability to reflect our society. This is a significant and exciting moment of change for Channel 4 as we evolve to ensure we are best suited to serve all of the UK. With this new strategy we will go even further to make sure that people right across the UK are represented on screen and in the make up of our own organisation—and it will also build on what we already do to support creative businesses, jobs and economies in the nations and regions.”

Today we have an opportunity to debate what that means and how Channel 4 can achieve that objective in practice with three new creative hubs and a new national headquarters outside London.

As we have already heard, the criteria that Channel 4 has set for its new national headquarters are that the new location should have a working population of at least 200,000, travel time to London of up to three hours, and a high level of physical and digital connectivity and infrastructure. In addition, Channel 4 has listed five considerations that it has identified to support the evaluation of submissions that will be undertaken by Channel 4 and its advisers. The considerations are economic, demographic, diversity and environmental factors; the existing availability of talent and a future pipeline, including educational links; local connectivity and broader infrastructure; ease and speed of travel for Channel 4 employees and partners between the different creative hubs; and effectiveness and efficiency of available

[Richard Burden]

office space. I want to argue today that the west midlands should be the choice for Channel 4 to meet those criteria.

Why do I say that? First, as a region we easily meet the physical criteria set by Channel 4. We have a population of 2.8 million. Birmingham alone has a population of 1.5 million people. Our travel time to London by rail is 85 minutes and will be even less after the arrival of HS2. Some 86% of properties in Birmingham achieved ultrafast broadband in 2017. On the availability of office space and other physical facilities, the west midlands has those in abundance at a fraction of the price in London.

To give just two examples from Birmingham, Digbeth has established a real reputation as a creative quarter close to the HS2 station that will be coming and is close to the BBC's base at the Mailbox. Longbridge in my own constituency is undergoing a massive transformation. It has direct rail connections to central Birmingham and beyond. It is close to the M42 and the M5 motorways and is just down the road from the BBC's drama village in Birmingham, Selly Oak. Birmingham has many studio and production spaces at various locations, as does Coventry, a city that has already shown its potential by winning the accolade of the UK's city of culture 2021. It, too, has a great deal to offer Channel 4.

Those are all reasons why in many ways the west midlands would be the least disruptive option for Channel 4. But if Channel 4's vision, as set out by Alex Mahon, is to be realised, it has to be more than about physical location. It has to be about people. That is where the west midlands is the most disruptive choice for Channel 4, and that means it is also the right choice if Channel 4 is serious about diversity being in its DNA, because diversity is in the DNA of my region, the west midlands.

Research from five years ago showed that there were people from 187 different national backgrounds living in Birmingham. We have 108 languages spoken in the city. We are the youngest city in Europe, with nearly 45% of our people under the age of 25. Already, the west midlands is showing itself to be a pioneer in the disruptive technologies that are transforming what media mean in the modern age. We are home to the gaming industry. We are pioneering new content, new platforms and new forms of production. That is why the BBC has chosen Birmingham as the home for BBC Three; it is trying to tap into a generation that knows that access to media content as and when they want it is digital, and for whom the future is online. All that is connected to the needs of a young and diverse population.

If Channel 4 wants to reflect the United Kingdom of tomorrow, it should look at the west midlands today and get closer to it. Our young and diverse population is a massive reservoir of talent on which Channel 4 can build. Indeed, one of Channel 4's criteria for its new headquarters talks about needing not only a reservoir of existing talent, but a pipeline of talent for the future. Eight universities across our region are a part of that pipeline. Channel 4 itself can be a part of building that pipeline by the choices it makes. It has the opportunity not only to harness talent, but to help to transform lives and make social mobility a reality for people—whether it be minority ethnic communities or white working class young people growing up on the outskirts of our cities—to whom it seems as though opportunities are always there for someone else,

The heritage of the west midlands has always been about making things, and it still is. Innovation has always been at the heart of successful manufacturing, and our region is now the meeting point of the industrial makers, storytellers and artistic innovators. All those things have been brought closer together in the west midlands. By choosing the west midlands for its new headquarters, Channel 4 can get closer to it, too.

Sir Graham Brady (in the Chair): A number of Members wish to participate and I hope to avoid a time limit. If Members keep to about five minutes per contribution, I might be able to avoid that.

3.18 pm

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Tomorrow Liverpool will launch its bid to become one of the new locations for Channel 4. The bid has strong cross-party support from across the city region. The relocation of Channel 4 is long overdue. It recognises the skills and expertise right across the country. Relocation will benefit that national broadcaster at the same time as it regenerates the regions with businesses and jobs. Liverpool is the right place for Channel 4. It meets all the criteria set out, but has so much more. It is diverse: the world in one city. It has people with excellent skills and great enthusiasm. The area has great connectivity, with the excitement of the port.

Liverpool became the European capital of culture in 2008 because of its achievements, but also because of its potential. That pivotal year was indeed a launching pad. Now, in 2018, Liverpool has surpassed all expectations. It is the most filmed city outside London. It has the Liverpool Biennial. Always reinventing itself, it has great expertise in the media and digital industries, and at the Baltic Creative there are ever-expanding, innovative businesses. Liverpool has museums, the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts with its unique offer, theatres and much more. It is bursting with enthusiasm and energy, which are matched by people's expertise.

I have some questions about the process for selecting the new locations of the national headquarters and creative hubs. Will selection be carried out solely by Channel 4, and will the process be transparent? Have there been any prior meetings that might influence the outcome? Those important questions deserve to be answered, because the issue is a critical one. I hope that the Minister will give us reassurances on those important points. The relocation of Channel 4 is a great opportunity for Channel 4 itself, for the regions and nations of the UK, for broadcasting and for Liverpool. I hope that Channel 4 will make the right decision.

3.21 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on securing the debate.

The relocation of Channel 4's headquarters and the locations of the new creative hubs is an important issue, and although the debate is perhaps turning into something of a beauty contest—no doubt we shall be seeing much more of each other in the next few weeks—it provides the House with a valuable opportunity to consider the merits of the bids.

I must declare an interest in that I speak not only as the Member proudly serving the people of Barnsley Central but as the Mayor of the Sheffield city region. As part of my recent campaign I pledged to establish a more vibrant, successful and co-operative economy in South Yorkshire. Those plans are founded on a three-part economic strategy—to build on our strengths, invest in our future and develop a well-paid and highly skilled workforce. The first step on that road would be the establishment of a digital inclusion taskforce, which would pave the way for the development of Sheffield as a regional hub for the creative and digital industries. That is a vision that I share with the leader of Sheffield City Council, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), and hon. Members across South Yorkshire. I believe that that vision is attainable, not just because digital employment in Sheffield and South Yorkshire stands at more than 21,000, the top 25 tech companies in Sheffield employ more than 12,000 people and bring in more than £2 billion a year and Sheffield digital companies boast one of the highest growth rates of any cluster in the UK, but because we now have the potential to supercharge that transformation with the relocation of the national headquarters of Channel 4.

The public service remit for Channel 4 focuses on important issues including quality, innovation, experimentation, creativity, diversity, public service, character and education. If someone were to read out that list of eight words to me and ask me what I was thinking, my answer would be simple: Sheffield. I say that because Sheffield not only has a proud history of high-quality and diverse manufacturing and business: it has a proven track record of promoting public service, prioritising education, and constantly demonstrating innovation, experimentation and creativity in the face of new challenges and opportunities. It is home to ZOO Digital, which works from Hollywood to Bollywood with some of the biggest names in TV and film; Joi Polloi, a home-grown digital design agency demonstrating that kids from council estates can win BAFTAs; and two world-class universities. It should also be remembered that Sheffield is the UK's first city of sanctuary, and thus embodies much of the diversity and inclusivity that Channel 4 strives to represent.

Mindful of all that, I put a simple question to the Minister: can he think of a place in the United Kingdom that reflects the values of Channel 4 better than Sheffield? With the greatest respect to those making other bids, I cannot.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): People from Channel 4 listening to the debate will be beginning to realise that they are spoiled for choice. I urge my hon. Friend, in the spirit of Yorkshire solidarity, at least to acknowledge that with respect to the diversity, infrastructure and talent criteria the city of Leeds would be a great host for Channel 4, not least because of our strong record of television and film production in Yorkshire. Will he acknowledge that we will all fight as hard as I know he will to ensure that the city we represent will be successful when the decision is finally made?

Dan Jarvis: Of course I am happy to do that. Perhaps my one regret is that the decision will not be taken in a couple of months. Who knows what we might have done, had that been the case, working collectively and collaboratively across the great county of Yorkshire;

but, alas, I find I am on this occasion, almost uniquely, on a different side of the argument from my right hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan), who is sitting next to him.

I was intrigued to hear the comment of the hon. Member for Glasgow South about which city—if it were a city—Channel 4 would be. During questions in the House I said that if Channel 4 were a city it would be Sheffield, and that belief is based on a simple truth that makes Channel 4 and Sheffield a perfect fit for each other. I hope that I have made clear the strength of the bid that we shall submit tomorrow, but I want to mention how important the bid is and how much we hope to secure the investment. It is because the Sheffield city region is already home to 68,000 businesses, which generate £30 billion a year, but the average weekly salary is £60 less than the UK average, and it is clear that too few people in South Yorkshire have a decent income or get their fair share of the nation's wealth. The decision to locate Channel 4 in Sheffield would not only add significant weight to the Government's northern powerhouse but would provide a much needed shot in the arm for our city region—one that has in the past few years created 37,000 jobs. It would do much to tackle existing regional inequalities—something that should be a priority for any Government.

With all that in mind, and recognising that the decision is ultimately for Channel 4, I hope and trust that the Minister will give serious consideration to the strength of Sheffield's bid and that that will help to ensure that the brand that is "Made in Sheffield" will become as much a mark of excellence in the age of information as it was in the age of steel.

3.29 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham, and to put Cardiff's case for Channel 4. As we are talking about Channel 4, it is right that I should use four Cs to put my case: that we are a creative cultural capital, that we have a diverse community, that we have the cutting-edge capacity that Channel 4 needs and, crucially, that we already deliver a commitment to Channel 4 in our city.

My first speech in this place was about Cardiff and how it has changed over many years. We were at the heart of the industrial revolution and coal and steel exporting across the world; the first £1 million cheque was signed in the coal exchange. I spoke about how the smoke stacks and docks of old were giving way to the brand new creative cutting-edge industries of the future, and the opportunities that they were giving young people in our diverse capital city. That is where I see Cardiff's future, and I know that view is shared by my colleagues and hon. Friends the Members for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin), for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) and indeed for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), although I know he will have to take a careful and balanced view today from the Front Bench. That view is also taken by Cardiff City Council, the city region, our leader Huw Thomas, the Welsh Government and all our arts and cultural institutions, including those in the television and film production sector in Cardiff.

Independent TV already generates £350 million in the Cardiff economy every year. We already have 15,000 people employed in creative and cultural activities—

[Stephen Doughty]

a ready-made resource of expertise for Channel 4 to tap into. We have 7,000 students studying in the creative sectors in Cardiff at a range of institutions, which I will come on to. We have 3,000 creative companies and facilities located in Cardiff, including those in television and film production. Some are very large, including the famous BBC Drama Village, Pinewood Studios and Wolf Studios Wales. A strong relationship already exists between Channel 4 and Sianel Pedwar Cymru—S4C—the fourth channel in Wales, and its facilities are not far down the road. We also have the new ITV facility in Assembly Square.

We have fantastic facilities such as NoFit State Circus, the Wales Millennium Centre and the Cardiff Animation Festival, and community facilities such as Indycube in my constituency, which provides facilities for small, start-up creatives that are often supplying the larger facilities, right there and being supported in our community. We also have fantastic locations such as the TramShed.

We have a diverse community; I know many cities around the UK will share that, but Cardiff truly is remarkably diverse, with 100 languages, 100 nationalities and one of the oldest Muslim communities in the UK. In my own constituency alone I have six mosques, three Hindu temples, a synagogue just on the edge, a Sikh gurdwara, a Greek Orthodox church and people who have come from far and wide because of Cardiff's maritime heritage and our welcoming city. It is a remarkable community to draw on and represents the Wales and Britain of today—a perfect place for Channel 4.

Of course, diversity goes well beyond issues of ethnicity, religion and national origin. As a gay MP, I am proud that Cardiff hosts the Iris prize, one of the leading lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender film festivals, every year, that we are the host of Pride Cymru and part of the Big Weekend, one of the biggest LGBT celebrations across the UK, and that I am likely to bump into people such as Russell T. Davies down in Cardiff bay. He is the creator of one of Channel 4's most famous programmes, "Queer as Folk", and more recently things such as "Cucumber" and "Banana", as well of course "Doctor Who", produced in Cardiff.

We have a strong commitment to another issue that Channel 4 is also committed to—disability and Paralympic sport. We are the birthplace of Tanni Grey-Thompson, who learned to swim in the Splott pool in my own constituency and went to St Cyres School in Penarth, and of Paralympic champions such as Aled Davies and others whom Channel 4 has done so much to champion.

We have cutting-edge capacity. We were No. 1 for quality of life in the EU's city index in 2016. We have the digital connectivity and infrastructure that is driving so many creative film and TV companies to Cardiff. We have those three universities, the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff Metropolitan University and the University of South Wales, and we have the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama generating talent, skills, technical capacity and all the other supplies that Channel 4 will need to be successful in Cardiff. We have that crucial working population of one quarter of a million in Cardiff, and of course we have the wider capital city region. We have places such as Cardiff and Vale College in my own constituency, which I am proud to see building up young people to go into the creative sectors.

Crucially, we are already delivering a commitment for Channel 4. The broadcast award-winning Boomerang, one of the largest suppliers to Channel 4 covering primetime, daytime and sports coverage, is located locally. We have companies such as Nimble Dragon, Avanti, Sugar and Boom Cymru already working with Channel 4, and others are leading the way: One Tribe TV, Tarian, Vox Pictures, Orchard, Bad Wolf and Wolf Studios Wales. We have fantastic post-production facilities, with cutting-edge companies such as Gorilla, and visual effects companies such as Bait Studio, Milk VFX and Reel SFX. Fitting with what Channel 4 is looking for, the executive producer of "Doctor Who", Chris Chibnall, said, "The talent base here is simply extraordinary, it is ambitious, bold and takes risks."

That is very much the Channel 4 that I know and love, and that is what Channel 4 can gain from coming to Cardiff. I hope the Minister will listen closely; I hope Channel 4 will listen closely, and I look forward to supporting the bid with all my Cardiff colleagues and those in the wider region in the days and weeks to come.

Sir Graham Brady (in the Chair): In the interest of scrupulous geographical impartiality, I will impose a five-minute limit on speeches.

3.34 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) for securing today's debate.

The spread of the creative industries across our country is of great importance to me. I am lucky to have worked in the creative industries for many years, and because of that experience I understand the positive impact that they can have on economic growth, skills, training, employment and regeneration. That is why I see Channel 4's decision to move significant parts of its operation as a great step and a powerful catalyst for change. The opportunities the relocation brings have caught the attention of many regions, and the Leeds city region, which includes my constituency and the district of Kirklees, is among them. It hopes to spark a revolution in the creative and screen industries in Yorkshire.

Although I am happy to back that bid, I want to ensure that the decision makers do not overlook Leeds's less well-known neighbours. I hope they look beyond the big cities when choosing where to relocate, and factor in what surrounds those cities. Our towns and villages, such as Batley and Spen, have just as much to offer, and arguably more to gain. This revolution needs to benefit the whole of Leeds and the city region, not just the city. In Kirklees, we have talent, creativity, technical know-how and digital infrastructure to rival what can be found anywhere in the nation.

We are well served for motorway access; we have wonderful picturesque towns and villages, boutique hotels, great restaurants, loads of ice cream parlours, a proud industrial heritage and a vibrant multicultural community, not to mention mile after mile of stunning countryside. Channel 4 need look no further for film locations, from sprawling manors steeped in history and beautiful country parks to thriving urban hubs and heavy industry. "Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell" and the miniseries "Gunpowder" were both filmed at the stunning Oakwell Hall and country park in Birstall. The Emmy award-winning

“Hank Zipzer” was filmed in Batley, and Kay Mellor’s series on births, marriages and deaths was filmed in Dewsbury town hall.

Last year, in memory of my predecessor Jo Cox, we brought an acclaimed production of “Les Mis” to the town of Batley. We had a diverse community of 100 young people from across our diverse schools, with an A-list west end professional team sharing their skills and enabling our young working-class kids to punch well above their weight. We proved it could be done, and we will do it again. While Channel 4 is at the forefront of promoting regional talent, we have talent in spades. I beg the Minister to impress on Channel 4 that talent lies not only in the cities, but in the towns that surround them, and that the opportunities in these communities must be part of its thinking when deciding where to relocate. I put my hat in the ring and say that Leeds city region is obviously where my heart lies, but I hope the regional element will also be factored in.

3.37 pm

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): This is an exciting process, is it not? It is a great pleasure to follow the inspirational speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), and I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on his paean of praise for the great city of Glasgow.

I will make a couple of opening remarks before concentrating on the Leeds city region. It is worthy of note that, for the first time since I was originally elected to the House in 1997, it is uncontested across all political parties that Channel 4 is best in the public sector. To paraphrase Sir Michael Grade when he was chief of Channel 4, Channel 4 can be in the public sector with a public broadcasting remit or it can be privatised, but it cannot be both. The fact that this process is taking place at all is testament to that; long may it remain so.

Another point worthy of note is that the new management of Channel 4 have embraced the process. A year ago, when I was re-elected to the House of Commons and had my first contacts with Channel 4, there were doubts about whether it could possibly come out of London and whether the talent would be available, and we heard about moving schools and all the same sorts of excuses that were made in the debate about the BBC 10 or 15 years ago. I am very pleased. I congratulate Ministers and shadow Ministers on keeping up the pressure; I think Channel 4 management are now behind the process.

Channel 4 is a great British institution. There are few that are similar in other nations in Europe, except perhaps ZDF and ARD in Germany. To have two great public service broadcasters, and Channel 4 with its particular remit, is something that makes me proud to be British.

Moving on to the Leeds city region’s bid, my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen made the very good point that, although people say that their cities are like Channel 4, we have learned politically over the last few years that the United Kingdom is not just about cities. That is one of the strengths of the Leeds city region’s bid. Public investment in television in England and Wales over the last 30 or 40 years has all been in the west of the nation. There is a big gap in the east of the country where there has been no big investment in television and film.

There are obviously two bids here from Leeds and Sheffield, and both have strengths. As the new Mayor of the Sheffield city region, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), progresses in that role over the coming years, Sheffield will develop magnificently. At the moment, as an impartial judge from Keighley, I say that Leeds probably has the edge in terms of its creativity and of its being in the fastest growing area for television production throughout the country, and probably in terms of transport—until the new Mayor has had his full impact on improving Sheffield’s transport links. I would probably just about give it to Leeds.

However, I think we agree that it would be outrageous—I use that word advisedly, Sir Graham—if there was no representative from God’s own county on the shortlist that Channel 4 draw up. That is inconceivable, particularly given the investment record in the east of the country. I hope that, whether it is Leeds or Sheffield—unless both progress to the next stage—if only one Yorkshire city or region is on that shortlist, we will all unite behind it. This is a marvellous opportunity.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): To further make the case for the Leeds city region, we have the infrastructure, we have Sky, we have Perform and we have Yorkshire TV. We have Rockstar Leeds, the makers of Grand Theft Auto, which has sold more than 250 million copies around the world. We have Pace and ARRIS in Saltaire, which power internet and TV for hundreds of millions of people globally. We have the people and we have the infrastructure, does my hon. Friend not agree?

John Grogan: I do agree. One thing I admire about my hon. Friend is that he is much trendier than I am and is so much more in touch with the creative hub that is Leeds. He is right to say that Leeds has not only the history—Yorkshire Television and so on, which led to the spinning out of many production companies—but also this whole new phase and new generation of talent. I very much hope that Channel 4 recognises that.

3.42 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for your robust chairmanship and discipline so far in ensuring a geographical spread of speakers, Sir Graham. I congratulate my Glaswegian colleague and friend, the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), on bringing the debate. He made a marvellous, erudite case for Glasgow, which I hope to embellish on somewhat.

When considering Channel 4’s new “Location, Location, Location”, where better than where that magnificent programme, which is a great standard bearer for Channel 4’s publishing capability, is produced—in Glasgow? It is an independent production by IWC Media and is one example of the great pedigree that Glasgow already has in broadcast media. Where better for Channel 4 to relocate than Glasgow?

Glasgow’s relationship with public service broadcasting goes back to the very father of public service broadcasting, John Reith, who was educated in Glasgow and cut his teeth as an apprentice at the North British Locomotive Company in my constituency before traveling to London to set up the BBC in 1922. Glasgow’s relationship with the spirit of public service broadcasting is as old as

[Mr Paul Sweeney]

public service broadcasting itself, and is embellished both by the grit of the city's industries and the glamour of its creative capacity.

Bound up in the spirit of Channel 4 is its ability to take risks and to be radical. Who was more radical than John Logie Baird himself, one of the pioneers of television, who pioneered his craft at what became the University of Strathclyde and transmitted the world's first long-distance television pictures to Glasgow's Grand Central Hotel in 1927?

Glasgow today hosts two of the main broadcasters in the United Kingdom, including the ITV franchise Scottish Television, which started in 1957 and was born out of Glasgow's music hall and theatre tradition, based at the Theatre Royal in the city. That tradition continues today. Think of "Mrs Brown's Boys", one of the greatest productions on the BBC and one of its greatest comedy shows. It was born out of the risk taken by Iain Gordon, the proprietor of the Pavilion Theatre—the only independent theatre in Scotland—in bringing the stage show to Glasgow. As a result, it spun off and had such roaring success that it became an amazing BBC production. That shows the risks taken by our city's cultural champions at every level, from theatre through to broadcast media itself.

BBC Scotland, the mainstay of Glasgow's broadcast media capability—launched formally in 1968 but based in the city since 1957—broadcasts 15,000 hours of radio and television productions per year. That is one of the striking things about Glasgow's capacity: its broadcast media production capability. When I went down to Channel 4 last month, when it launched its call for places in the UK to bid for the relocation of its headquarters, one thing that struck me about its building in Victoria was that it has no studios. Channel 4 does not produce; it is a publisher. Critical to Channel 4's criteria for its location is its desire to be at the centre of a major hub and a major ecosystem of production capability.

That is where Glasgow has great strengths. It is already at the centre of an unrivalled capacity for delivering broadcast media production, ranging from massive global hits such as "Outlander", which is filmed and produced at studios in Cumbernauld in the greater Glasgow city region, through to "Question Time", which I am sure many Members are familiar with and which is produced by Mentorn Media, based in Glasgow. An old university colleague is an assistant producer on "Question Time"; I know many people who are highly involved in broadcast media production in Glasgow. There is a great talent base in the city to draw on.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Does the hon. Gentleman know that a Glasgow MP—one of my predecessors, the late Sir Teddy Taylor—appeared on the first ever edition of "Question Time"?

Mr Sweeney: There we go. We have a fine tradition, from creative comedy to drama, including political drama. Glasgow has a fantastic pedigree across the full spectrum of broadcast media production.

My experience of working in industry showed me that Glasgow always has that creative potential, with the interface of engineering, creativity and innovation working with Glasgow's creative sector.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point: would it not be wonderful for STV and BBC Scotland to be joined on the Clyde by Channel 4, just next to the shipyards for which he and I have a great passion?

Mr Sweeney: I share the hon. Gentleman's sentiments. That great creative media hub at the heart of Glasgow, at Pacific Quay, would be a magnificent centre for Glasgow to host Channel 4. There is so much opportunity there. It is a former industrial site that can be easily developed to meet the needs of Channel 4. There are also lots of other options, from CityPark in Dennistoun in my constituency, for which Stuart Cosgrove—a constituent of mine—is leading a bid, down to Film City in Govan, which is the old Govan town hall and has been converted into the most fantastic media hub for Glasgow and for Scotland.

My experience of working with Glasgow's creative sector was as a shipbuilder. We were looking at creating a museum of Glasgow's shipbuilding heritage. Sir Alex Ferguson, as a son of Glasgow, proudly sponsored the creation of a digital, virtual-reality reconstruction of Glasgow's shipbuilding industries. I share the sentiments wishing him all the best in his recovery from his recent illness.

I was involved in helping to create that reconstruction with the Digital Design Studio—now the School of Simulation and Visualisation—which is part of the Glasgow School of Art. After we created it, it was so impressive that BAE Systems decided that it wanted to utilise it for modern shipbuilding. That is an example of how Glasgow's creativity and media production could actually help to generate innovation, even in the old industries, as we have seen; we created new innovations in engineering. That is exactly the sort of dynamism and creativity that Glasgow is all about.

That is just one example of how I have interfaced with that, and it shows why Glasgow offers such a good opportunity to be the heart of Channel 4's production capability—by plugging into that great ecosystem at the heart of the city. I have every confidence that Glasgow will present a robust bid that will be looked upon very favourably by Channel 4, and which will plug into the best traditions of Glasgow—innovation, creativity and dynamism.

3.49 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting today's debate. It is no coincidence that five hon. Members from the Leeds city region—I say "York and Leeds city region"—are here for the debate. Because of the sheer scale of the creativity, talent and diversity across our region, it is crucial that we speak up for the future of the region, but also for the future of this sector. We must see this as a global opportunity for Channel 4. There are major export opportunities for our economy, but also opportunities for serving the public and enriching our culture at the same time. Media is so powerful in its execution, and this proposal provides a real opportunity to rebalance our economy and to celebrate the diversity of our communities as we move forward.

I will say York's piece, because colleagues have spoken for their own part of the region. York is a city that is transitioning from the Vikings, steam trains and chocolate

that we all think about to one that now stands as the UK's only UNESCO city of media arts. It is unrivalled in its digital and media offer and is one of 114 global cities within that footprint of UNESCO. It is where the past meets the present and it provides the platform to shape the future. Today, I want to extol the virtues of York as the place for Channel 4 to find its home.

Educationally, we see the city advancing in the creative sector. I am thinking of Manor school and its state-of-the-art studios to develop pupils' interest in the sector; the investment that the independent-state schools partnership puts into the media industry to draw on the talent of the children of our city and give them the opportunity to experience the sector; and the outstanding York College, which provides a platform for academic and vocational excellence. We have two fantastic universities: York St John University and the University of York, which is now third in the nation for film and television production. Impressive as it is, its reputation is growing; I visited only recently.

York is a desirable place to live. In fact, it comes out consistently as the UK's No. 1 place to live and to visit, with 7 million visitors each year. With its connectivity, the city is like no other. We have the TransPennine Express—it will be express, particularly under a Labour Government when we get electricity on the line. We have the east coast main line, which means that we are within two hours of London, and again, journey times will be shortened, because High Speed 2 will be arriving at the heart of our city. Seven million people can reach the region within an hour.

We have an opportunity to create and shape the future of that part of the country as we see the creative sector growing. I am thinking of the Mediale festival, a digital media festival at the heart of York. The Castle Gateway project is moving forward; that area will be York's new cultural hub.

I will focus my final comments on the economic opportunity and cultural opportunity that York offers. Next to the station is a 72-hectare site, the biggest brownfield site in Europe, where Channel 4 can come and shape its future and the future of our city. In its digital connectivity, the city of York is like no other in the UK. It is the first gigabit city in the UK, with its extensive dark fibre network.

As a city, we have grown in the new technologies of the future, and the digital creative sector is at the heart of stretching our economy into new fields. It is certainly the way forward for Channel 4; it will see a skills base on which it can draw. The digital creative labs in York are unparalleled in the research that they are doing. That is driving the sector forward. The studios at Church Fenton have such a reputation; we have heard about the films being made. There is also the gaming industry; we can look at the creative industry on that front. Again, we are at the forefront. York provides a massive opportunity for Channel 4 to find its new home, and it will reach into the whole business community of the city. It will give the perfect offer to Channel 4.

3.54 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am delighted to be able to speak in support of the proposal that Channel 4 come to Glasgow, the city that I represent. I express my solidarity with Team Glasgow, who are heading down on the train from Glasgow just now. To my council

colleagues, Stuart Cosgrove and the rest of the team who are on the train on their way down here with the bid document, I say that I look forward to their safe arrival in the city. I like to think that we are playing for the away team and they are the home team, coming down to do their very best for us.

Glasgow is very much the right city for Channel 4, because like Glasgow, Channel 4 is pure gallus, and it has been from the start. It offers something that challenges, that is different and that is unusual, and it seeks to find the stories that we do not get in other places; that is certainly the story of Glasgow.

Already, as other hon. Members have said, there are production companies that are based in Glasgow and going about the business of telling the stories of the people. Firecrest Films specialises in documentaries, such as "Breadline Kids", which brought the story of people who were in severe poverty to our screens. Nicole Kleeman says that basing Channel 4 in Glasgow would be an "enormous opportunity in Scotland". It is currently telling the story of the cancer hospital, the Beatson, which many of my constituents have found very moving. They can see their own stories reflected in those documentaries.

Matchlight, which is also based in Glasgow, says:

"Glasgow is inherently diverse in all measures. It would be a great home for the channel. TV must represent all of the UK if it is to be relevant to the audience."

Matchlight also works in Gaelic. It does production for BBC Alba as well as for Channel 4, where it works for "Dispatches", which, as we all know, tells really deep and important stories and brings them to light.

Raise the Roof is the UK's sixth fastest growing indie producer and is also based in Scotland. It is the biggest Channel 4 supplier from Scotland, and very proudly so. Not only does it do work here, but its very successful production company, which was built through Channel 4's programmes, exports to 37 countries around the world, so this activity is not just of benefit to Glasgow, Scotland or the UK; we are growing the ability of our native producers to export to the world. Chris Young of Young Films, who is best known for "The Inbetweeners" and is based in Skye in Scotland, also says that basing the channel in Glasgow would be a game changer for Scotland.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I could not agree more with the hon. Lady's advocacy of the strength of the Glasgow bid. Two "Star Wars" actors, including Ewan McGregor, came from my constituency of Ochil and South Perthshire. Does she agree that locating Channel 4 in Glasgow will provide opportunities and inspiration not only to the city, but to the counties and regions that surround it?

Alison Thewliss: I very much agree. One frustration that I picked up in meeting some of the production companies and Channel 4 at a meeting that it hosted with me in Glasgow, at its West George Street base, was that of always having to look at things through a London lens. The creative decision makers at Channel 4 are often based down here, so basing Channel 4 in Glasgow would be a radical decision that would re-tilt the axis of the media in the UK. I feel that it would also bring benefits to Northern Ireland, which is within close travelling distance of Glasgow, and to the north of England. It would fundamentally change the way in which the media work in the UK.

[Alison Thewliss]

Glasgow is many things, but it is also very closely bound together. It is a very cohesive city; we cannot ignore one another in the street. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) and the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) mentioned, it has diversity. It has people who have lived in Glasgow all their lives; interlopers like me, from Lanarkshire; and people from Somalia, Pakistan, Eritrea, China and Afghanistan. They have all come together and live cheek by jowl—not across boundaries, but cheek by jowl with one another in one of the friendliest cities in the world.

I would like to tell a wee anecdote to exemplify just how friendly Glasgow is. At an event that Radiant and Brighter—an organisation that helps to support people who come to the city from other countries—held at the city chambers in Glasgow, a doctor who was speaking at the meeting said, “My experience of coming to Glasgow was that I came out of Central station and was a bit lost. I didn’t know where I was going, so I asked somebody. That person not only told me where to go; he took me to where I was going. He took time out of his day to take me along the street and around the corner to the place that I needed to get to.” That typifies Glasgow for me: people are so friendly that they will go out of their way to help others and make them feel at home.

Channel 4 would be very welcome in the city as a large employer, but also as part of the creative culture of the city. We have in the city the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, bringing through great, wonderful arts graduates. There is also the Glasgow School of Art, which is a beacon of art and design. There are also other universities and colleges within the city, all of which produce great talent that would be very well employed at Channel 4.

I would like close with an anecdote from a member of my office staff, Alexander Belic, who had cause to leave the city for a brief period earlier on today. He told me what he saw when he came back in:

“There is a busker performing ‘No Diggity’ on a guitar and a leprechaun releasing torrents of bubbles down Buchanan street—what a town.”

I think Channel 4 would fit well within Glasgow. I welcome it to choose Glasgow and back our bid.

Sir Graham Brady (in the Chair): We now have three Front-Bench wind-ups and a moment or two at the end for Mr McDonald to wind up, too.

4 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. This is an important debate about one of the most exciting media developments that has happened in the UK in many years. As many others have done, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on securing this debate. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions in this well-informed and highly entertaining debate.

I wonder if hitherto Channel 4 had any idea just how popular it was. There is hardly a nation or region that has not extolled its virtue this afternoon. In many ways, however, this debate is an after-party. As us luvvies

would say, we have retired to the green room. Those who were here bright and early this morning will know that the bidding war started at Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions. No one should be surprised that the first shots in that war were fired by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), who was of course backing Glasgow’s bid to be the home of Channel 4’s national headquarters. By the end of DCMS questions, supporters from Sheffield, Birmingham and Lichfield had made their pitches too. I believe there were others, but I suspect that many of those were hon. Members who had not a clue what was happening. They had walked into a bidding war and wanted to ensure that their constituency did not miss out on what was on offer.

As anyone will testify, I came to this debate as a fair and honourable man, and with a completely open mind. But having heard so many excellent speeches from hon. Members from different areas across the UK, I have decided to throw my not inconsiderable weight behind the Glasgow bid. Yes, I can see the shock on the faces in front of me, but I have been persuaded by the excellent contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow South and for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), and the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney). I endorse everything they said. If Channel 4 is seeking a new location, location, location, there is nowhere better suited than Glasgow.

As Stuart Cosgrove, the broadcaster and journalist chairing Glasgow’s bid, said:

“Glasgow is in tune with the values that are at the heart of Channel 4—diversity, equality, innovation with a bit of irreverence thrown in.”

He could have added to that if Channel 4 wants to relocate to a city that already boasts a thriving independent production and freelance sector; a city where both the national Government at Holyrood and local government in George Square are totally committed to supporting the film and television sector; and a city where there is a vast array of creative and cultural talent that is ready, willing and able to get to work, that city is Glasgow.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is the people of Glasgow who create that environment, which allows that degree of creativity?

Brendan O’Hara: I could not agree more. It does not happen often—let us call it a red-letter day—but I believe I am in agreement with the hon. Gentleman. As the leader of Glasgow City Council, Susan Aitken said, our city has

“a high concentration of skills, academic excellence and a highly qualified workforce.”

Although I am the proud representative of Argyll and Bute, I am a proud Glaswegian to my bootstraps. I absolutely agree with both Susan and Stuart. As someone who has spent the majority of their working life making television programmes for the Scottish, UK and international markets from Glasgow, I cannot think of a better place for a vibrant, exciting, innovative and daring broadcaster to set up its headquarters than Glasgow.

Although this is a bid for and on behalf of the city of Glasgow, it is in many ways Scotland’s bid. Scotland’s First Minister gave it her unequivocal backing, when she said:

“the unique character of Glasgow, multicultural, welcoming, hugely creative, and irreverent, is a great fit for Channel 4.”

In an almost unprecedented move, the leaders of all of Scotland's political parties are united in support of this bid. If that were not enough to persuade Channel 4 to move to Glasgow, the fact that the city of Edinburgh is prepared to set aside ancient rivalries to support Glasgow's bid should tell Channel 4 that there are now no limits to what it can achieve by setting up its national headquarters on the banks of the Clyde.

Glasgow fits all the criteria like a glove. It ticks all the boxes: population size, proximity to centres, and the level of physical and digital connectivity. Glasgow is already home to BBC Scotland and STV. It boasts of having the National Film and Television School hub, based at Pacific Quay. Channel 4 itself has had a presence in the city for many years.

Mr Sweeney: When it comes to journey times, there is a three-hour target. I can get from my flat in Glasgow to the door of my office in Westminster in three hours. Not only that, but we have a commitment from the Department for Transport that HS2 will deliver three-hour journey times by rail as well. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Brendan O'Hara: Anything that can speed up journey times to Glasgow has a beneficial effect for the whole of the United Kingdom. I am certain that Glasgow City Council would make the transition for Channel 4 as painless as it could possibly be for the company, its employees and their families—more painless than Phil and Kirstie could ever do. We have heard welcome contributions from the hon. Members for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), for Keighley (John Grogan)—the Mayor of Sheffield just learned the old adage that the opposition may be in front of you, but you your enemies are most certainly behind you—for Glasgow North East and for York Central (Rachael Maskell). I imagine that if some enterprising producer is watching this debate, there is a fantastic new Phil and Kirstie series to be made, based on that list of people trying to get relocation, relocation, relocation to their town or city.

For me, the most important contributions have come from my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow Central and for Glasgow South. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central was absolutely right when she said that Glasgow is indeed “pure gallus”. I believe it is that gallusness that sets it apart from any other bid. She was right to highlight the welcoming nature and cultural diversity of Glasgow. As the mover of the motion, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South, said, we have Chinese, Pakistani, Indian and Caribbean communities, as well as an array of African communities and a multitude of our highly valued EU citizens, including—I just found this out today—our Lord Provost, who is Swedish-born. Glasgow has always had worldwide appeal, and that is reflected in the cultural diversity of our city. It is a major attraction to a broadcaster such as Channel 4.

In conclusion, I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate and I thank all who took part. It has been well informed and hugely entertaining, a bit like “Channel 4 News”. As my SNP colleagues have said, we very much welcome Channel 4's decision to move its national

headquarters out of London. It is something that I have wanted to happen for a long time, both in my career as a television producer and latterly as a politician. Indeed, I raised the matter with David Abraham, the Channel 4 CEO, at his final appearance before the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee last year. I spoke of the frustration that producers felt about having to come to London from Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, the north-west of England or wherever to pitch an idea to a London-based commissioner, who they just knew did not quite get it because he or she did not live in the same world. To move out of London can only be a good thing for Channel 4, for creative sectors across the UK and for those communities whose voices and stories are rarely heard.

Whichever city Channel 4 decides to move to, I guarantee that it will find no warmer welcome and no greater support from local and national Governments than it will receive in Glasgow, and it will not meet a more creative and multicultural community ready to make an outstanding success of the move than that of Glasgow.

4.9 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on securing this interesting debate. The message that we should all take away is that we have great cities and towns around the United Kingdom that are all ready to bid for the wonderful opportunity of the relocation of Channel 4's headquarters and the creative hubs.

The hon. Gentleman reminded us of the connection between the city of Glasgow and Nelson Mandela and, by coincidence, I was in Cardiff on 16 June 1998 when Nelson Mandela received the freedom of the city. The hon. Gentleman also made a strong case for the city of Glasgow, and it was heartening to hear such a full endorsement from the SNP of a pitch process entitled “4 All the UK”. That can only be a welcome development. On a serious note, he rightly highlighted the merits of his city and its wonderful creative sector.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) described Birmingham as both the least and the most disruptive choice for Channel 4 in an imaginative and creative use of language, and made an extremely strong case for his city.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) made her pitch for the wonderful city of Liverpool. She described it as the most filmed city outside London, which is a statistic I was not aware of. She did not mention the marvellous Liverpool Everyman Theatre, where my brother, Patrick Brennan, is starring as Iago in “Othello” and as Ben Rumson in “Paint Your Wagon” as part of the Liverpool Everyman rep revival, which has gone so well and had marvellous reviews. Tickets are available from all the usual locations. It is a wonderful city with a marvellous cultural heritage. In promoting it, she did not even emphasise the Beatles that much, which shows that there is an extremely broad and wonderful cultural offer in the city of Liverpool, which is another worthy candidate for Channel 4's relocation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) is the newly elected Mayor of the Sheffield city region, so may I take the first opportunity to congratulate him publicly on that achievement? He described our

[Kevin Brennan]

debate as a beauty contest. We are all relieved that he did not describe it as an episode of “Naked Attraction”, which I understand is one of the late-night offers on Channel 4—not that I have ever seen it myself. The clarity of his pitch explains why he was so successful in his recent campaign. For a man famous for his gallantry, he was surprisingly easily ambushed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), but he made an excellent pitch on Sheffield’s behalf.

My neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), rightly pointed out that as someone speaking from the Front Bench, I have to maintain a degree of neutrality in relation to the proposed bids. I have to say, however, that he made an extraordinarily powerful, persuasive, compelling, erudite and eloquent case for the capital of Wales as the ideal home for Channel 4’s headquarters. I will say no more than that, in case I get into a lot of trouble with my hon. Friends.

Stephen Doughty: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind comments. There is another benefit for Channel 4 in that it could have two diversely performing MPs. He performs with MP4 and has a TV career, and I performed with my a capella group, House of Chords, at Pride Cymru last year. Channel 4 would have performers in its MPs as well.

Kevin Brennan: I am not one to blow my own trumpet, so I will not comment further on that, and I do not want to endanger my relationship with my hon. Friends by saying anything further about Cardiff’s bid.

May I take this opportunity to wish my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) a happy birthday? She was seen celebrating last night, and she is looking remarkably fresh today. I will say no more. She eloquently made an important point about the need to ensure that our creative industries serve our towns as well as our cities. She also pointed out that our creative industries often rely on locations out of cities in the countryside—our heritage locations—which hon. Members have celebrated here and in other debates on tourism and the creative industries. We should remember how important that is to channels such as Channel 4. In particular, I praise her efforts last year, and the efforts of the commission she worked on, to open up opportunities for working-class children in the creative industries. I strongly commend her for that, and she made a very good speech today.

I am sorry to admit that I have known my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan) for more than 35 years, which is a long time. He made a strong case for the Leeds city region. He rightly pointed out that we have reached a consensus about Channel 4 being in the public sector that is to be welcomed above all. For many years, the uncertainty about its status and the threat of privatisation undermined the sort of process that we are talking about, which gives clarity to Channel 4’s future in its role as a public service broadcaster. He said that we have two great public service broadcasters, but we actually have more than that. As well as the BBC, we have ITV, Channel 5, S4C—the Welsh fourth channel—and STV, which remains an independent channel in the ITV family, as was mentioned.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) rightly pointed out Glasgow’s history, the origin of television and the great John Logie Baird’s contribution. He described the commission of “Mrs Brown’s Boys” as a cultural risk. I had not thought that it was that much of a risk, but it is a fine programme. He pointed out that the lack of studios at Horseferry Road should be about spreading capacity across the country.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) mentioned a third Yorkshire city—York itself. She described a brownfield site near York station and its excellent connectivity, and made a powerful case.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) listed all the production companies—

Alison Thewliss: Not all of them!

Kevin Brennan: Well, not all of them; some of them—a small smidgen of the production companies based in the city of Glasgow. Again, she made a powerful case on Glasgow’s behalf.

I will say a word or two about Channel 4. We welcome the fact that Channel 4’s status in the public sector has been confirmed and that the Government have decided that they will not pursue its privatisation, which was under consideration. We welcome the process that Channel 4 has begun, because it is important that our creative industries are spread around the country and not just based in the city of London. Talent is everywhere in the UK, as we have heard, but the opportunity to exploit that talent or to work in the creative industries is not always equally spread.

This is an important moment. Hon. Members may guess my private thoughts on the matter, but whoever wins the bid, it will be a major step forward in ensuring that that opportunity is spread around the country so that talent from all sorts of backgrounds and all parts of the United Kingdom has a chance to prosper in our wonderful creative industries.

4.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): It is a great honour and pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. You may be forgiven for thinking that you have been presiding over a constituency candidate selection process, with everybody speaking so eloquently and passionately about their own area, but at least it was not a beauty contest, because that would have been very difficult for you indeed.

The first thing I want to do, of course, is to thank the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) for introducing this debate on Channel 4’s relocation proposals. He spoke eloquently, as he usually does, and passionately about his constituency and his home town, where he was born and brought up, as did all the other Members who spoke about their own local areas this afternoon.

That includes the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), who powerfully extolled the virtues of Birmingham and the west midlands, including the impressive transport links, and the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), who is always very persuasive. She asked questions that I will come to in more detail in a moment. However, this is of course a matter for Channel 4; it is Channel 4’s process.

It is not a matter for Ministers. It is an ongoing process, it is well-publicised and we will work to ensure that Channel 4 delivers on it.

The Government were very happy to reach an agreement with Channel 4 earlier this year for it to increase its regional impact. As Members from across the House have said, that is very important. We also want to protect and enhance this important public asset, to make sure that it has a bright and sustainable future in a fast-changing broadcasting landscape. We are conscious of that and it is what we want to do—to support Channel 4 in that endeavour.

The Government have long been clear that Channel 4 should have a major presence outside London and should increase out-of-London commissioning. There is an awful lot of talent out there, outside London as well as in it, and as a publicly owned public service broadcaster Channel 4 should do more for the entire nation, and should represent and reflect the voices of those who live outside the capital city. The Government are committed to that aim and to spreading opportunity throughout the United Kingdom, and we want Channel 4 to be a part of achieving it by stimulating creative and economic activity right across the country.

Last year, we ran a public consultation on the future of Channel 4. An overwhelming majority of respondents agreed that Channel 4's regional impact would be much enhanced if more of its activities took place outside London and more of its staff were based outside London. I think we can all agree that it is not right that at the moment only 3% of Channel 4's staff are based outside London. Public service broadcasting should mean serving the whole of the United Kingdom, not just those in the capital or indeed those in the bubble of Westminster.

Channel 4 spends around twice as much on programming made in London as it does on programming made in the rest of the United Kingdom combined. Its physical concentration in London is reflective of a wider trend in the broadcasting and production sector, where we have not hitherto seen an even distribution of growth. Although only 20% of the population of this country live in London and the south-east of England, over two thirds of UK producers are based there. It goes without saying that that limits the spread of jobs, prosperity and opportunity outside the capital in all our wonderful geographical locations, and also limits the representation of local views and local interests on television. People seeking to work in the media should not feel that they have to move to London to do so.

Channel 4's series of proposals, announced in March, will help to reverse that trend. Channel 4 agreed to establish a new national headquarters in the nations and regions, with 300 staff outside London, including key creative decision makers. That number will also rise over time. Moreover, Channel 4 will establish two other smaller creative hubs across the UK. As a consequence, its London footprint will reduce and its headquarters in Horseferry Road will become its London HQ.

Channel 4 will also increase its out-of-London commissioning—this is very important—to more than 50%, stimulating the creative economy across the country. Channel 4 estimates that this will lead to £285 million more in spending out of London than is required by Ofcom. Channel 4 will strengthen its regional impact on screen by becoming the first channel to co-anchor its

evening news bulletin from a new regional studio, which is also symbolic and important. It will help to provide a gateway for journalistic talent in the nations and regions to reach “Channel 4 News”. Channel 4's proposals will mean visibly reflecting the regional diversity of our country, both on and off screen, and according to economic analysis that my Department has commissioned these measures could support an overall redistributive regional impact of close to 2,700 regional jobs.

Channel 4 launched its pitch process, as it is called, in April, inviting bids from cities across the United Kingdom to find the locations for its national HQ and creative hubs. This process is currently ongoing and will allow Channel 4 to carefully consider a range of different cities across the nations and regions. Following the completion of that bidding process, Channel 4 will look to announce its decisions by the autumn of this year and will be moving staff by the end of 2019.

I am sure that Channel 4 is paying close attention to the debate—during it, people have been doing some showreels to get on “Channel 4 News” tonight—and to all the pitches that it receives from across the spectrum, including, of course, from outside this Chamber. I am confident that it will receive impressive bids from across all of the United Kingdom.

This historic deal marks the start of a bright future for Channel 4. Since its establishment over 35 years ago, and I am old enough—just—to remember its opening day, Channel 4 has had an enduring impact on UK culture and UK society. I am sure that we will see it go from strength to strength under the imaginative new leadership of Alex Mahon. Channel 4's remit includes requirements to be distinctive, to innovate, to promote alternative views and new perspectives, and to appeal to a culturally diverse society. As a result, it has often led the way in areas of diversity and in representing different communities, with groundbreaking shows, including some that have been mentioned today, such as “Queer as Folk”, “The Last Leg” and many others.

Channel 4's regional proposals show that it is now leading the way in regional representation and that Channel Four Television Corporation is indeed a public service broadcaster that truly provides for the entire country that owns it, which is crucial. This deal will have far-reaching implications for the entire broadcasting sector—it is groundbreaking in that sense—and I hope that others will look to follow Channel 4's bold lead.

4.27 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the debate this afternoon. When my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), who is the Front-Bench spokesperson for my party, said to me at the start of this debate that he had arrived with an open mind, I was ready to shred his Celtic Park season ticket myself, but I am glad that he came down on the side of the angels in the end.

This has been an unusual debate, in that we have been asking things of people outwith this Chamber today; oh to be the Minister in a debate such as this, where there have been pretty much no asks of him whatsoever. Nevertheless, I genuinely thank colleagues for their many fine contributions, as they put forward their bids for their own home turf.

[Stewart Malcolm McDonald]

I will just end with one thing that Billy Connolly said about Glasgow, a place that he left to go and explore the world as a fantastic comedian but always loved to come home to. He said that when you arrive in Glasgow and step off the train at Glasgow Central station, it is the only city on Earth that you can feel rise up through the soles of your feet, and we invite Channel 4 to come and experience that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the relocation of Channel 4.

4.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 10 May 2018

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Leaving the EU: Environmental Principles and Governance

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): It is this Government's ambition to ensure we leave our environment in a better state than we inherited it. It is our aim not just to protect and conserve but also to enhance and restore habitats and landscapes. The recently published flagship 25-year environment plan sets out the scale of our future ambition. The environmental principles and governance consultation document that we have published today outlines proposals to help deliver on this, including a new, ambitious Environmental Principles and Governance Bill.

For many who care deeply about the environment, and have fought for its protection over several decades, our membership of the European Union (EU) has coincided with increased awareness of environmental concerns and improved mechanisms to safeguard the natural world. We want to ensure that the new mechanisms we put in place as we leave the EU do not just maintain, but also strengthen protection for the environment.

Our new Environmental Principles and Governance Bill is designed to create a new, world-leading, independent environmental watchdog to hold Government to account on our environmental ambitions and obligations once we have left the EU. When the UK leaves the EU, we will no longer be under the jurisdiction of the EU institutions which currently provide oversight and enforcement of many of our environmental laws. The new body will ensure that environmental standards are upheld after we leave the EU, holding Government to account for their delivery.

In order to ensure we have robust environmental governance systems in place, we propose that the new body should have three main functions: providing independent scrutiny and advice; responding to complaints; and enforcing Government's delivery of environmental law where necessary. However, we are consulting on what functions and powers the new body should have specifically, and would welcome a wide range of stakeholders' views on this subject.

The new Environmental Principles and Governance Bill will also establish a new, comprehensive, statutory environmental principles policy statement. The current system of EU environmental legislation is underpinned by a number of "environmental principles", such as sustainable development, the precautionary principle and the polluter pays principle. Although these principles are already central to Government environmental policy, they are not set out in one place beside the EU treaties.

The consultation is exploring the scope and content of a new statement on environmental principles in order to underline our commitment that environmental

protection will be enhanced, not diluted, as we leave the EU. We are consulting as to whether the environmental principles themselves should be listed in the Environmental Principles and Governance Bill, in addition to the policy statement. It will be a statutory requirement for Government to have regard to the policy statement as they interpret the environmental principles. We also propose to give the new environmental body the function and powers to scrutinise application of the policy statement, periodically advising Government on possible improvements and taking action to ensure application, if necessary.

This consultation is concerned with environmental governance in England and reserved matters throughout the UK, for which the UK Government have responsibility. However, we are exploring with the devolved Administrations whether they wish to take a similar approach. We would welcome the opportunity to co-design proposals with them to ensure they work across the whole UK, taking account of the different government and legal systems in the individual home nations.

[HCWS675]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): The Government have committed to support those of the Windrush generation who have faced difficulties in establishing their status under the immigration system. Among the series of measures to help put things right, I have already announced that a compensation scheme will be put in place for those who have suffered financial loss as a result of these difficulties, and that we will consult on the design of this scheme. I want to do this as quickly as possible. But also need to get the detail right reflecting the complexity of ways in which people might have been impacted.

As a first step to establishing the compensation scheme the Home Office is today launching a call for evidence that is addressed to those who have been affected by this situation, and to their families. This will be the first step of the consultation process, and will be published on gov.uk. A copy of the document will also be placed in the House Library.

It is always important for government to listen, and it is especially important to do so now. To put things right we need to understand more about what happened, to understand the personal stories, which will help to inform the design of the compensation scheme. As well as receiving written contributions I have asked officials to reach out to the people and communities most closely affected, listen to their concerns directly and, in particular, understand properly how we might address them through a compensation scheme.

I believe it is also important to have some external assurance that the compensation scheme meets the needs of those affected. So I will appoint an independent person to oversee the running of the scheme when it is in place. Martin Forde QC has agreed to provide independent advice on the design of the scheme. He is himself the son of Windrush parents and brings a wealth of experience in complex public law and

compensation matters. I am confident that he will ensure that the interests of those affected will be properly represented and reflected in the scheme.

The call for evidence will run until 8 June. Once we have listened and considered those contributions, I will then launch a public consultation as soon as possible to provide the technical detail on proposals for the compensation scheme. I want to put in place a compensation scheme as quickly and as carefully as possible, to help redress what has gone wrong.

[HCWS674]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): On 27 March, the then Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government announced to the House that he was minded to appoint commissioners to take over functions associated with governance and scrutiny, appointment of statutory officers and strategic financial management at Northamptonshire County Council (“the authority”).

These proposals followed the publication of the report of the independent best value inspection, led by Max Caller CBE, at the authority which contained serious findings. In particular, the inspector identified that the council has failed to properly comply with its best value duty for some time. This is not because of lack of funds: as the report states, the council’s “Mind the Gap” analysis “does not demonstrate that [the Authority] has been particularly badly treated by the funding formula”.

The report sets out in some detail the governance failings which have culminated in the council’s chief finance officer issuing a section 114 notice to stop new spending and KPMG’s advisory notice on the council’s budget. It concludes

“living within budget constraints is not part of the culture of [the Authority]”.

Alongside this announcement on 27 March, the authority and principal local authorities in its area were invited to make representations about his proposals on or before 12 April. Both the authority and the principal authorities made representations, as did Voluntary Voices Northamptonshire—an organisation representing voluntary bodies in the Northamptonshire area. All welcomed the proposal to appoint commissioners and the authority asked that such an appointment should be made as quickly as possible. Following consideration of these representations and further consideration of the inspector’s report, I have now decided to go ahead with the proposals made by my predecessor.

I have decided to appoint two commissioners forming a team with a proven record in providing leadership and financial stability in local government:

Tony McArdle (lead commissioner)—until February 2018, chief executive of Lincolnshire County Council, a post he held for 12 years. He has previously held a number of senior posts in local government and is currently chair of the Association of County Chief Executives.

Brian Roberts (finance commissioner)—former director of corporate resources and deputy chief executive at Leicestershire County Council until end March 2018. This followed on from a varied career in local government. A past

president of CIPFA, he has also been a past president of the Society of County Treasurers of the Association of Local Government Treasurers. Currently a national council member and a trustee of the Centre for Public Scrutiny.

The commissioners have been appointed for the period from 10 May 2018 to 31 March 2021 or such earlier or later time as I determine. I have not ruled out the possibility of further commissioners should the need arise.

I have published the directions and explanatory memorandum associated with this announcement on:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/northamptonshire-county-council-directions-and-explanatory-memorandum>

The 27 March announcement was accompanied by an invitation to all the principal Northamptonshire local authorities, including the county council, to make proposals for a restructuring of local government across Northamptonshire. The authorities are working together well on this and have asked that I extend the deadline for responses from July to August. I am happy to do this, to enable further opportunity for local community engagement and consultation, and the development of locally generated proposals. I have also asked the Local Government Association to consider how best to support the authorities as they develop their proposals. They are working on this and an announcement will be made shortly.

[HCWS673]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Trade Remedies

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): In November 2017, the Government introduced the Taxation (Cross-Border Trade) Bill and the Trade Bill into Parliament. Together, this legislation will establish the framework for a robust trade remedies framework for the UK once we leave the EU, and establish an independent trade remedies authority (TRA) to operate that framework.

On 29 March 2018, the Department secured a technical ministerial direction to authorise spending on the implementation of the TRA prior to Royal Assent for the Trade Bill, in line with the guidance issued by the Permanent Secretaries of HM Treasury and the Department for Exiting the European Union as well as the written ministerial statement from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in October 2017.

The Government have continued to progress work to ensure that the UK has an effective trade remedies function for when we leave the EU. Following a review of suitable locations, the Government have determined that the TRA will be based in Reading. The high concentration of required skills and excellent infrastructure links to the rest of the UK will provide an ideal basis for the TRA to carry out its essential work to protect domestic industry from unfair trading practices and unforeseen surges in imports.

Following engagement with devolved Administrations and key stakeholders, today the Government will begin the process to recruit and appoint a chair designate to prepare for this important role, ready to take on the leadership of the TRA board once the Trade Bill has completed its passage through Parliament and achieved Royal Assent.

[HCWS672]

Petition

Thursday 10 May 2018

OBSERVATIONS

EDUCATION

School budgets

The petition of residents of Craven Ward,

Declares that the cuts in spending to school budgets in Craven Ward, in the constituency of Keighley and Ilkley, will lead to further staff redundancies, increasing class sizes, reductions in the range of subjects on offer and a decline in educational standards.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reverse the cuts that have been made to school budgets in Craven; further to protect per pupil funding in real terms in the schools of Craven over the lifetime of this Parliament; and further to ensure no school loses out in real terms as a result of any new funding formula.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by John Grogan, *Official Report*, 14 March 2018; Vol. 638, c. 6P.]

[P002120]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds):

Last year, we announced the details of the national funding formula for schools which is supported by significant extra investment of £1.3 billion across 2018-19 and 2019-20, over and above the budget announced at the 2015 spending review. School funding is at record levels, with core funding for schools and high needs rising from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £42.4 billion this year and £43.5 billion in 2019-20.

The need for reform has been widely recognised because of the manifest unfairness in the previous system. Given the significance of this reform, we undertook wide-ranging consultations which allowed us to hear from, and carefully consider, over 26,000 individual respondents and representative organisations.

Supported by our significant additional investment, the national funding formula will also:

Recognise the challenges of the very lowest funded schools, by introducing a minimum per pupil funding level. Under the national funding formula, in 2019-20 all secondary schools will attract at least £4,800 per pupil, and all primary schools will attract at least £3,500 per pupil. In 2018-19, as a step towards these minimum funding levels, secondary schools are attracting at least £4,600, and primary schools £3,300.

Allocate every local authority more money for every pupil in every school in 2018-19 and 2019-20. Final decisions on local distribution will be taken by local authorities, but under the national funding formula every school is attracting at least 0.5% more per pupil in 2018-19, and 1 % more in 2019-20, compared to its baseline.

Provide a £110,000 lump sum for every school, and for the smallest, most remote schools, distribute a further £26 million through dedicated sparsity funding.

Full details on the notional allocations for local authorities and schools can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-funding-formula-tables-for-schools-and-high-needs>. These include notional school level allocations showing what each school would attract through the formula.

As a result of these changes, under the final national funding formula, schools in the Keighley constituency would gain 2.1% if the formula were fully implemented (based on 2017-18 data). Bradford schools will continue to have higher per pupil funding than the national average under the national funding formula, as the formula allocates additional funding to schools with many additional needs pupils to help those who have fallen behind their peers. Therefore, this higher than average funding reflects the high proportion of pupils with additional needs (such as deprivation, low prior attainment, English as an additional language, etc) in Bradford schools.

The previous Secretary of State set out in her statement to Parliament in July 2017 that, to provide stability for schools through the transition to the national funding formula, local authorities will continue to set their own local formulae which will determine individual schools' budgets in their areas, in 2018-19 and 2019-20, in consultation with local schools.

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 10 May 2018

TRANSPORT

Concessionary Bus Passes

The following is an extract from a debate in Westminster Hall on concessionary bus fares on 8 May 2018.

Alan Brown: I welcome audio-visual announcements. I am one of the MPs who backed the “Talking Buses” campaign by Guide Dogs. Can the hon. Lady give a clearer timescale for when audio-visual information will be mandatory on buses?

Ms Ghani: We have had the action accessibility plan, which we will be responding to very shortly, within the month. We are working with the Royal National Institute of Blind People and the charity Guide Dogs. [*Official Report, 8 May 2018, Vol. 640, c. 224WH.*]

Letter of correction from Ms Ghani.

An error has been identified in my answer to an intervention by the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown).

The correct answer should have been:

Ms Ghani: We have had the action accessibility plan, which we will be responding to very shortly—**within months**. We are working with the Royal National Institute of Blind People and the charity Guide Dogs.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 10 May 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ATTORNEY GENERAL	885	DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT—continued	
Director of Public Prosecutions	891	Football: Safe Standing Areas.....	870
Domestic Violence	887	Historic Landmarks	875
Gangs: Exploitation of Vulnerable People	892	Museum Sector	880
Hate Crime	890	Music Industry.....	875
Knife Crime	885	Public Broadcasting	881
Unduly Lenient Sentence Scheme	889	Sport Funding: Special Needs Schools.....	869
		Ticket Prices: National Sporting Events.....	876
DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	869	Topical Questions	881
Broadband and Mobile Coverage: Rural Areas.....	873	UK Tourism.....	878
Channel 4 Relocation.....	872	Youth Services.....	878
Charity Regulation.....	879		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 10 May 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS.	19WS	HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT	21WS
Leaving the EU: Environmental Principles and Governance.....	19WS	Local Government	21WS
HOME DEPARTMENT	20WS	INTERNATIONAL TRADE	22WS
Immigration	20WS	Trade Remedies.....	22WS

PETITION

Thursday 10 May 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>	<i>Col. No.</i>
EDUCATION	7P	
School budgets.....	7P	

MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Thursday 10 May 2018

	<i>Col. No.</i>
TRANSPORT	9MC
Concessionary Bus Passes	9MC

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CONTENTS

Thursday 10 May 2018

New Writ [Col. 869]

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 869] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport
Attorney General

Royal Assent [Col. 893]

Private Members' Bills: Money Resolutions [Col. 894]
Answer to urgent question—(Andrea Leadsom)

Business of the House [Col. 906]
Statement—(Andrea Leadsom)

Belhaj and Boudchar: Litigation Update [Col. 926]
Statement—(Attorney General)

Mental Health: Failing a Generation [Col. 937]
Select Committee Statement—(Luciana Berger)

Backbench Business

Banking Misconduct and the FCA [Col. 947]
Motion—(Martin Whitfield)—agreed to

Libyan-sponsored IRA Terrorism [Col. 982]
Motion—(Mr Laurence Robertson)—agreed to

Crossrail Extension to Ebbsfleet [Col. 1005]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Community Transport [Col. 343WH]
Channel 4 Relocation [Col. 370WH]
General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 19WS]

Petition [Col. 7P]
Observations

Ministerial Correction [Col. 9MC]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
