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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 22 May 2018

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Support for Businesses and Entrepreneurs

1. **Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to support businesses and entrepreneurs. [905469]

11. **Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What steps he is taking to support businesses and entrepreneurs. [905479]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): One year on from the appalling Manchester Arena attack, I am sure that I speak for everyone in the House in saying that on this day our thoughts are with those who lost their lives and their families, and those who suffered life-changing injuries. We will remember them with a minute's silence later today.

The UK's 5.7 million small businesses make a vital contribution to our economy, employing 60% of the private sector workforce, and the Government are determined to facilitate their success. We are keeping taxes low and ensuring that firms can access the support that they need to thrive. Following the patient capital review, we are expanding the tax reliefs available to entrepreneurs that will support them in growing their businesses, and we have launched a patient capital action plan to unlock £20 billion of funding to help high-growth firms to reach their potential.

Sir David Amess: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he will not raise taxes on small businesses, and will he share with the House what help the Government will give to entrepreneurs who are setting up for the first time, with particular regard to the business rate?

Mr Hammond: We have already introduced business rate concessions to reduce the burden of rates on small businesses, including by bringing forward by two years the switch in indexation from the retail prices index to the consumer prices index. We are ensuring that Britain is the world's leading place to start and grow a business, including through reducing corporation tax rates. There are almost 7,000 small businesses in Southend-on-Sea alone, and this Government back them every step of the way. I can tell my hon. Friend who will raise taxes on small businesses, and has said so publicly: he is sitting opposite me.

Huw Merriman: In the rural and coastal parts of east Sussex that I represent, infrastructure delivery is key to bringing more businesses and entrepreneurs to the area. What plans does the Chancellor have to continue investment in road, high-speed rail and broadband connections so that we can attract more businesses to rural parts of this country?

Mr Hammond: The national productivity investment fund is investing in all those areas. We have the biggest rail investment programme since Victorian times and the biggest road building programme since the 1970s, and we are investing in superfast broadband, which is critical to this country's future. As my hon. Friend will know, in his area we are investing in the A21, and we are working with Network Rail on exploring options for connecting HS1 services to Hastings via Ashford International.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Surely the Chancellor knows that the thing holding back most businesses—small, medium-sized and large—is the lack of good skilled people to work for them. When is he going to give the Secretary of State for Education a good shaking and make him do something about the apprenticeship levy, apprenticeship schemes and the higher education graduate apprenticeship scheme?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is right that skills are a critical factor for business in an economy with such high levels of employment and low levels of unemployment as we have achieved. We are investing in apprenticeships with the new apprenticeship levy, providing funding for more and better apprenticeships; we are investing in T-levels, improving substantially the level of technical training for 16 to 19-year-olds; and we are reviewing the operation of tertiary education funding.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): Marks & Spencer is closing 14 stores, affecting hundreds of jobs, and Debenhams and House of Fraser would be doing the same were it not for their longer lease commitments. The nature of the high street is changing, and the risk is the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs. What are the Government doing about this, and will the Chancellor consider meeting me and businesses in Croydon as we push ahead for a new Westfield shopping centre in what is undoubtedly a difficult environment?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady correctly identifies the underlying problem: the nature of retailing is changing. Britain is leading the world in the adoption of online retail, which has huge opportunities, but will also bring huge changes. This is a microcosm of the changes we will face in this economy over the next 10, 20 or 30 years, as the digital revolution changes fundamentally the way we do business. The answer is not to try to resist change, but to embrace it, and to make sure that we train our people so that they can take up the new challenges and have the new opportunities that this economy will bring.

20. [905488] **Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Microbusinesses are a great British success story, with thousands of new businesses set up around people's kitchen tables, but many are struggling with regulations and tax changes that are intended to

constrain the actions of big business. Will my right hon. Friend advise us what steps he is taking to make sure that he controls regulation and reduces tax burdens affecting microbusinesses?

Mr Hammond: We have taken steps that I have already outlined this morning to reduce the burden of taxation on businesses large and small, although of course small businesses are most beneficially affected by the £10 billion programme of reducing business rates costs and through the reduction in corporation tax levels. But we are always looking for further ways to support the smallest businesses and to encourage them to become larger businesses.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I associate myself with the Chancellor's remarks about the Manchester bombing.

For the Chancellor to make up his own small business tax policies on the hoof is one thing; making them up for the Labour party is a fantasy. The Government have ruled out a customs union with the European Union worth £16 trillion for an alternative customs union with British overseas territories worth only £22 billion. Is the Chancellor happy with that decision? Can he give us any clue about how such a decision will support businesses and entrepreneurs?

Mr Hammond: I do not know whether that was an announcement of a change in Labour party policy. My understanding is that the Labour party's position is to increase corporate tax rates for small businesses. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will tell us whether he has changed his position.

On the question of our future customs arrangements with the European Union, the hon. Gentleman will know that I have consistently sought arrangements that will protect our existing trade with the European Union, allowing British businesses to continue to trade freely with the minimal possible friction at the border with the European Union. We do not believe it is necessary to be in a customs union to achieve that.

Peter Dowd: For the Chancellor's information, he can easily find our policies on www.labour.org.

When the Chancellor met David Cameron last October to give a thumbs-up emoji to Mr Cameron's UK-China investment fund, presumably to help businesses and entrepreneurs, was he aware that the fund is to be domiciled in the Republic of Ireland? If so, did he think to ask the former Prime Minister whether that was for the purposes of tax avoidance?

Mr Hammond: I have already answered the hon. Gentleman's questions about my meeting with Mr Cameron last October. In a meeting that ranged across a number of issues, Mr Cameron was good enough to inform me of his intention to take up this role with a fund promoting investment both in China and the UK. The Government support all initiatives that improve trade and investment between the UK and China.

Cost of Living

2. **Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con):** What progress the Government have made on supporting families with the cost of living. [905470]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): People's disposable income is now 4.6% higher in real terms than in 2010. That is because we have turned around the economy and held taxes down.

Trudy Harrison: According to recent figures from the Office for National Statistics, real household disposable income is £1,600 higher than in 2008, while the proportion of lower paid workers has fallen to its lowest level for 35 years due to the national living wage. Does my right hon. Friend think that those statistics would be as positive if we had taken the advice of the Labour party?

Elizabeth Truss: As my hon. Friend knows, the advice of the Labour party is that we need to "overthrow capitalism". If we were to do that, there would be fewer businesses, fewer jobs, higher taxes and higher mortgage rates—and we would all be queuing for food, as people are in Venezuela.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Families with three children are at a greater risk of poverty than other families, and next year the Chief Secretary to the Treasury will take £1.2 billion away from them. Does she agree that this is the least family-friendly Government in history?

Elizabeth Truss: What we have done for families is make sure that more parents and families are in work than ever before, enabling them to look after and support their children. We are also investing a record amount in childcare—£6 billion a year—to help more parents into work.

19. [905487] **Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con):** Increases in the personal allowance and the national living wage, and the freeze to fuel duty, have helped my constituents with the cost of living. However, things are still tough and too many are just about managing. What further plans does my right hon. Friend have to continue to support my hardworking constituents?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right that we need to keep taxes down, but we also need to recognise the role that free enterprise and free markets play in encouraging competition, allowing new products to come to the market and keeping prices low. The reason why we have low food prices and cheap air fares is because we have successfully kept those markets open. The Labour party advocates abandoning that.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Tory austerity will result in annual social security cuts of £4 billion in Scotland by 2020. The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that 1 million more children will be pushed into poverty across the UK. With planned devolution covering only 15% of social security spending, the blame lies firmly at the Chancellor's door. Does the Minister think that is acceptable?

Elizabeth Truss: What I find incredible is that the Scottish National party, which has been in power in Scotland for many years, presiding over declining education standards and now raising taxes in Scotland, has the audacity not to take responsibility for its own policies and actions.

Kirsty Blackman: The Chief Secretary did not answer my question. Once a fortnight someone comes into my office with so little income that we have to refer them to a food bank. When will the Chancellor realise how much harm he is causing? When will he reverse the cuts and when will he end the hunger?

Elizabeth Truss: The reality is that we have seen more people in work in Scotland, as we have across the country, and that is delivering more real income. We have held taxes down across the country, to the tune of £1,000 per basic rate taxpayer, which means that people have more disposable income to spend.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Well, that was fascinating.

The Chief Secretary knows full well that 67% of children in poverty live in working households. The Child Poverty Action Group expects cuts within universal credit to push up to 1 million children into poverty by 2020. When all the Government's policy changes are included, lone parents have lost an average of £5,250 a year since 2010. Families with three or more children have lost £5,600 a year. Families with a disabled parent and a disabled child have £6,500 less every single year. Is she complacent or just callous?

Elizabeth Truss: Surprise, surprise: we have not heard Labour acknowledge the excellent news from the Resolution Foundation that we now have the lowest share of low-paid employees for 35 years—before the Labour Government were in power. Under Labour, we saw rising unemployment and more people left on the scrapheap. We saw a welfare system that did not support people into work.

Mr Speaker: Order. We need to make faster progress. If people could keep their questions brief, and if answers could focus, as constitutionally they must, on the policies of the Government, that would be the proper procedure in the House. The right hon. Lady is very experienced and I know she knows that extremely well.

NHS and Adult Social Care: Multi-year Funding Plan

3. **Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** If he will bring forward proposals for a multi-year funding plan for the NHS and adult social care. [905471]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): We will come forward with a new long-term plan for the NHS and provide a new multi-year funding settlement in support of that plan. What is also important is that we are developing policies on artificial intelligence and digital services to make sure that our NHS delivers better outcomes for patients.

Wera Hobhouse: To raise the amount we need for long-term sustainable services for my constituents and people across the country, will the Chief Secretary consider introducing a ring-fenced health and social care tax that would bring together spending on both services into a collective budget?

Elizabeth Truss: As the hon. Lady knows, the problem with such hypothecated taxes is that if the revenues from them go down, the consequence is a reduction in support for our NHS or our social care services. That is why we believe in funding those services out of general

taxation. We put an extra £6.3 billion into the health service at the Budget. We are looking at the longer-term settlement, but it is important to note that this is about not just the money we spend, but how we spend it.

PFI Contracts

4. **Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of his Department's procedure for authorising and monitoring private finance initiative contracts. [905472]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The vast majority of PFI projects—86%—were signed off under the last Labour Government. Since 2010, we have reformed the approach so that PF2—private finance 2—contracts, in the selective circumstances in which they are used, now deliver better value for money for the taxpayer, so far delivering over £2 billion of savings.

Liz Twist: Recent research from the University of Greenwich suggests that bringing existing PFI contracts back in house could pay for itself within two years. The National Audit Office has noted that Government Departments reported the “operational inflexibility” of PFI, so can the Chancellor explain why his Department is still pushing the increasingly discredited and scandal-ridden PFI model under the disguise of PF2?

Robert Jenrick: Under the last Labour Government, the average number of PFI contracts signed per year was 55. In the last two years, the Treasury has signed off none. We will use this approach selectively when it delivers a genuine transfer of risk and provides value for money for the taxpayer, not as the last Labour Government did.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): As the Minister said, PFI was hugely popular under the last Labour Government. Will he confirm whether PFI stands for “private finance initiative” or “pay for indefinitely”?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend highlights the cost and legacy of the PFI projects signed off under the last Labour Government. Hon. Members can be assured that we will use this approach wisely and selectively, in particular for the most complex infrastructure projects requiring a transfer of risk and the expertise of the private sector.

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): On PFI hospitals, the National Audit Office report recently found

“no evidence of operational efficiency”,

and that in the NHS,

“the cost of services, like cleaning...hospitals is higher under PFI contracts.”

Will the Chancellor explain why his Government persist with imposing higher costs than necessary on local health budgets instead of ensuring value for money for the taxpayer?

Robert Jenrick: I think that the hon. Lady is having amnesia. These contracts—86% of the contracts and 91% by value—were signed under the last Labour Government. In respect of some of the items that she

mentioned, such as cleaning and security services, we have reformed PFI contracts under PF2 so that those items are not included in the standard contract.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Would my hon. Friend be interested to learn that when I was a lowly Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Treasury in 1996 and 1997, John Major was constantly trying to make us finalise PFI contracts, but we in the Treasury refused because they were bad deals? As soon as Labour got in, they went straight ahead and entered into those bad deals.

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The initial intention of PFI was to transfer risk, when appropriate, to the private sector, and to drive up innovation and quality in a very small number of selective cases. That was perverted under the last Labour Government by Gordon Brown.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): We have learned from the experience of PFI; this Government—
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Anneliese Dodds: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

This Government have not. In the light of last week's report on Carillion, we want to know whether the Minister can indicate which PFI contracts are being delivered by contractors that are deemed to be actually or potentially high risk. Following last week's reports that failed bidders for PFI contracts will be compensated, can he rule out bailing out firms that fail even to win contracts? We need answers on these questions now, not a history lesson.

Robert Jenrick: As I have indicated, this Government's approach to PFI is entirely different from that of the last Labour Government. The hon. Lady says that she has learnt the lessons. Well, it is a pity for the taxpayer, and for our children and grandchildren, that they were learnt so late.

Lifetime ISAs

5. **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): How many people have paid a 25% withdrawal charge to use their lifetime ISA savings since that scheme was established. [905473]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): In the first financial year, 2017-18, there was no unauthorised withdrawal charge in place. The data for 2018-19 is obviously not yet known, but HMRC will publish it when it is available.

Justin Madders: Will the Minister look at the effect of the withdrawal charge more closely? A first-time buyer has told me that he has found a home that suits his needs, but because his lifetime ISA is less than a year old, he will not only lose his Government bonus but have to pay a £375 penalty charge back to the Government out of his own money. Why are aspiring homeowners being penalised in this way?

John Glen: I am of course happy to look at that case. Following my appearance at the Treasury Select Committee, I asked my officials to look at the guidance on the

website, as I am anxious not to put misleading advice on there. The LISA is available for long-term savings. That was the scheme's objective when it was set up.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I am pleased the Minister just mentioned his appearance before the Select Committee, where we explored the issue of the 25% charge and the fact that a further 6% of capital can also be lost. Will he update us? He has talked to officials about looking at the website. Will he ensure that the Treasury website is fully compliant with Financial Conduct Authority rules applicable to firms in the private sector?

John Glen: I am taking this up further, but I am concerned not to put a misleading flat-rate percentage on there, given that most savers who make an unauthorised withdrawal will pay a different amount according to their circumstances.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): We have junior ISAs, cash ISAs, stocks and shares ISAs and lifetime ISAs. Will the Minister consider simplifying the entire ISA system to help young people in particular with long-term, cost-effective saving?

John Glen: The Government have developed a range of savings products and incentives, or encouraged providers to do so, to reflect the range of needs. We have also raised the ISA allowance to £20,000 and introduced the personal savings allowance, meaning that 95% of people do not pay any tax on their savings income. It is important that we have that range of options for all age groups.

Productivity

6. **Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase productivity throughout the UK. [905474]

7. **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What fiscal steps his Department is taking to increase regional productivity. [905475]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The Budget showed our determination to improve productivity, increasing the national productivity investment fund by £8 billion to £31 billion. With substantial investment in the regions of the UK, such as the £1.7 billion transforming cities fund, we want to help all parts of the country achieve their potential.

Andrew Bowie: I am sure the House will be united in rejoicing that the UK's productivity last year grew by 0.7% and in the last quarter increased at its quickest pace in six years. Does my hon. Friend agree that raising our productivity is the only way to deliver higher-paid and better jobs for the future?

Robert Jenrick: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Raising productivity is the only sustainable way to grow the economy, boost wages and improve living standards, which is why we have given it such a clear and determined focus. With respect to Aberdeenshire, the North sea oil and gas industry is one of those sectors that have seen

the greatest productivity increases in recent years. We will continue to support that with a highly competitive tax rate.

Mike Amesbury: Given that average UK productivity is 30% below German levels, does the Minister agree it is now time to rebalance our economy and support further devolution for areas such as Cheshire and Warrington?

Robert Jenrick: It was of course this Government who one year ago created the Mayors across the UK, including in Greater Manchester, and several of them, including Andy Street, have had a great impact on their local economies. I have had conversations with the leader of the Cheshire and Warrington local enterprise partnership and the Minister responsible at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to take such matters forward.

23. [905492] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): May I challenge the Government to maintain a strong emphasis on sound management of the public finances so we can invest in skills and apprenticeships to boost productivity and living standards?

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is only with sound management of the public finances that we can continue to invest in the skills required to grow productivity, and that is exactly what we are doing with increasing investment in apprenticeships, through the apprenticeship levy, and with the T-levels, which will be largest change to our secondary education system since the introduction of A-levels and which we will be seeing in the coming years.

15. [905483] **Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): The unique cross-border region of north Wales and Cheshire is one of the most dynamic economies in the United Kingdom. Will the Treasury—which has promised a north Wales growth deal in, I think, at least three Budgets, but has yet to deliver a penny—please stop marking our homework, and give us the freedom to invest in the economy that we believe in?

Robert Jenrick: We have had numerous conversations with local partners in north Wales, and with the Welsh Government. I urge the hon. Gentleman to take the message to the Welsh Government, but they also need to engage with the UK Government to secure that important deal, which, as he says, will link the economy of north Wales with the north-west and the northern powerhouse to drive productivity.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Does the Minister agree that cutting corporation tax to 19% has encouraged business investment, boosting productivity as well as encouraging the creation of 3 million new jobs?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When we reduce the tax to 17%, we will see those productivity gains increase—and, contrary to what the Opposition have claimed, revenues have increased.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Eurostat figures show regional inequality in the United Kingdom, measured by output per hour, to be the worst

in Europe, and the Government have failed to close the gap since 2010. When will the Chancellor commit himself to making the investment that is needed to end regional imbalances that have seen the north of England set to receive just one fifth of the transport investment per capita in London?

Robert Jenrick: The Infrastructure and Projects Authority, which has conducted the most rigorous analysis of Government spending on infrastructure, has made clear that the north of England will receive more funds from the present Government than any other region in the United Kingdom, including London and the south-east.

New Technologies

8. **Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to support firms harnessing new technologies. [905476]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The Government are committed to helping firms to harness the benefits of new technologies, and we are taking action to do so. For example, we have set the annual investment allowance at £200,000 a year, its highest-ever permanent level; we have announced a 10-year action plan to unlock more than £20 billion to finance growth in innovative firms; and we have delivered the biggest increase in research and development investment in 40 years.

Alan Mak: Britain is becoming a world leader in technology businesses at the cutting edge of the fourth industrial revolution. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that our tax system remains competitive, to maximise the support that we give to our business entrepreneurs?

Mr Hammond: Yes. I congratulate my hon. Friend on his commitment in this regard, especially in his role as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on the fourth industrial revolution. Science, research and innovation are areas in which the UK has huge strengths. Our challenge is to provide the right environment—including the right tax environment—to ensure that that potential stays in the UK, and is developed here. We have introduced a range of incentives through the tax system, such as R&D tax credits and entrepreneurs' relief, as well as the lowest corporation tax rate in the G7.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Given that Northern Ireland is the cyber-security centre of the UK, what steps is the Chancellor taking to provide tax relief to encourage global businesses to consider using Belfast and other equipped cities as their bases?

Mr Hammond: We have a globally competitive offer for businesses seeking to locate in the United Kingdom, and, of course, Northern Ireland will have corporation tax flexibilities of its own in due course. However, we seek to make all parts of the UK attractive to foreign direct investment, and Northern Ireland has done extremely well from that.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will the Government please explain what is being done to help firms in places such as west Oxfordshire to harness 5G and broadband,

making them more competitive, making them raise more money, and creating the capital that will enable us to fund the public services that the Labour party wants to overthrow?

Mr Hammond: This is partly about public investment and partly about private investment to encourage the roll-out of full-fibre broadband technologies and give companies access to the funds that they need to make investments and take advantage of the public infrastructure. We will make further announcements about our forward broadband strategy during the summer.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Scottish Government's Budget included a 70% increase in investment in business R&D. To prevent that investment from being undermined by the Government's approach to Brexit, will the Chancellor commit himself to maintaining the EU levels of R and D funding beyond the current cycle?

Mr Hammond: Once we have left the European Union the money that was reaching the UK from EU sources will be allocated to the UK shared prosperity fund, and over the course of this year we will consult on both the distribution and the application of those funds and the size that that fund should be.

First-time Home Buyers

9. **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What steps he is taking to support first-time home-buyers throughout the UK. [905477]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): In the last Budget we abolished stamp duty for first-time buyers for the first £300,000 of a property's value up to £500,000 in total. That has meant that 95% of first-time buyers have paid less stamp duty and a full 80% of first-time buyers have paid no stamp duty at all.

Stephen Metcalfe: Last November the Chancellor announced an ambitious package to tackle the broken housing market. How many first-time buyers have benefited from that package, particularly in Essex, and where can people find further information about this so we can make hopefully impressive numbers even greater?

Mel Stride: Some 69,000 individuals have already benefited from this vital tax relief and over 1 million will do so over the coming five years. We do not have disaggregated data specifically for Essex, but I can tell my hon. Friend that within the south-east 12,900 individuals have benefited from first-time buyer tax relief.

17. [905485] **Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): My constituency tops the leader board for house building, building at the moment over three a day. Can the Minister give an assessment of how much my first-time buyers are saving because of the Government's policies?

Mel Stride: As I outlined to my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) who asked the preceding question, in the south-east 12,900 first-time buyers have benefited from this relief, of whom 9,000 purchased a property of a value of between £300,000 and £500,000 in total.

Tax Credits Overpayments

10. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the number of tax credits overpayments. [905478]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has taken a variety of steps to reduce overpayments of tax credits including real-time income data in-year, guidance that is very clear on these matters, and of course providing appropriate contact routes with HMRC so that those who have changed circumstances can indicate that to our tax authorities.

Chris Elmore: Overpayment of tax credits can have disastrous impacts on families; a constituent of mine has been left with a bill of £8,000 as a result of purely administrative errors admitted by HMRC. Such errors can create real financial hardship and in the past have even pushed some families into poverty. Will the Minister start instructing Treasury and HMRC officials to do more to tackle this problem?

Mel Stride: HMRC is doing a great deal, as I have already outlined to the hon. Gentleman, in terms of making sure that the correct information is provided. Overpayments do not solely emanate from HMRC; there is of course customer error and there can be negligence or a failure to report a change of circumstances. But I can assure the hon. Gentleman that HMRC is always sympathetic and careful in its approach to anybody in the kind of situation he described.

Economic Growth

12. **Andrew Percy** (Brigg and Goole) (Con): What steps he is taking to support economic growth. [905480]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The best way to drive economic growth is to raise our productivity growth rate. That is why since 2010 the Government have overseen over half a trillion pounds in capital investment including in the national productivity investment fund, have increased investment in skills and have reduced taxes for business, and I tell my hon. Friend that the way not to support economic growth is through more borrowing, more debt and higher debt service costs.

Andrew Percy: After we voted to leave the EU, a vote endorsed by huge numbers across the north of England, we were told by some that mismanagement of the economy would occur under this Government. The reality in the north, despite those who talk the economy down, is that we have record employment and some of our areas have the fastest growing economies in the country, so may I urge the Chancellor to continue investing in the north and to ignore those, on the Opposition Benches especially, who repeatedly talk down the north of England?

Mr Hammond: Since 2010 the shadow Chancellor has predicted that the UK would go into recession on no fewer than eight separate occasions—that is eight out of zero. But the UK economy is growing steadily and is now 10.7% bigger than its pre-crisis level, and the

Office for Budget Responsibility expects it to continue to grow in each year of its forecast to 2022. While we know that the shadow Chancellor does not think that a growing economy matters, let me tell him why I do: a growing economy means more jobs, more prosperity and more security for working people.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): What consideration has been given to the contribution that varying certain business taxes, such as VAT, according to the nation or region of the UK could make to encouraging economic growth?

Mr Hammond: The Government's view is that a unified rate of VAT across the United Kingdom is an important part of our single market of the United Kingdom, which is an essential economic good for the whole of this country.

18. [905486] **Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con): Economic growth in Moray will get a huge boost when the Moray growth deal is agreed. It has the support of businesses and communities throughout my area, and I back it 100%. Will the Chancellor meet me to discuss the Moray growth deal and the huge benefits that it will bring to my constituency?

Mr Hammond: We absolutely look forward to being able to make progress on the Moray growth deal, and I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend. I know that the Exchequer Secretary, who is dealing with this matter, would also be pleased to meet him.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The Government acknowledge that they want to spread wealth and economic growth across the United Kingdom through their industrial strategy. Does the Chancellor of the Exchequer therefore agree with the Welsh Affairs Committee, chaired by the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), that the money from the cancelled rail electrification between Cardiff and Swansea should be spent in Wales, so that we can have that shared prosperity?

Mr Hammond: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I firmly believe that the service that will be provided on the route from London to Swansea will deliver exactly what passengers have bargained to get, without the need for the disruption and cost of overhead electrification. We will look at the funding needs of all parts of the United Kingdom appropriately, to support economic growth and to reduce regional disparities.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) has question 21, which is not altogether dissimilar from the one with which we are dealing, but which will probably not be reached. If he wants to come in now, he can. If he does not, he need not do so. But he does, so he will.

21. [905489] **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. With regard to important infrastructure projects such as the north-west relief road in Shrewsbury, will the Chancellor give me an assurance that when the land frees up housing

capacity when the road is built, that will be taken into consideration when the schemes are apportioned funding?

Mr Speaker: Especially for the purposes of generating economic growth.

Mr Hammond: Precisely, Mr Speaker. It is the economic growth generation potential of housing development that we will take into account when evaluating transport proposals. In relation to the specific project to which my hon. Friend refers, the Exchequer Secretary advises me that the Department for Transport is eagerly awaiting a business plan for the project from the relevant local authority.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Does the Chancellor agree that a devolution settlement for all Yorkshire with an elected Mayor, as supported by all Conservative councils in the county, could improve economic growth in the region?

Mr Hammond: The Government will look carefully at proposals from Yorkshire leaders for a devolution settlement, provided that it does not undermine the existing South Yorkshire-Sheffield city region devolution settlement that has already been established, with a Mayor already elected.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The port operator Associated British Ports, the Hull and Humber Chamber of Commerce and many local businesses are giving serious consideration to free port status for the Humber ports in the post-Brexit world. Will the Chancellor or his Ministers agree to meet representatives of the business community in the area and to give serious consideration to this proposal when the idea has been further developed?

Mr Hammond: As my hon. Friend will know, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has a great interest in that proposal. Without even needing to consult her, I can say without hesitation that she will be delighted to meet him and his colleagues.

Wage Growth: Young People

13. **Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the level of wage growth for young people over the last 15 years. [905481]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): From 2002 until the crisis, young people saw their real wages grow more slowly than the UK average. In fact, their wages fell more during the recession. Since 2014, young people's wages have been rising faster than the UK average.

Nic Dakin: Young people are struggling to get a good start in the job market. They are earning less, working longer hours and commuting further than their parents' generation. What are the Government going to do to transform their outcomes?

Elizabeth Truss: The most important thing is that those young people are in jobs, and under Labour we saw unemployment rise to 20%. Youth unemployment has reduced by 40% since 2010. I recognise that we need

to see those young people get better skills. That is why we are investing in IT training, that is why we are developing the maths premium so that more students study science, technology, engineering and maths, and that is why we have developed the apprenticeship levy to get more people into apprenticeships.

Money Laundering and Criminal Finance

14. **David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): What recent estimate the Government have made of the cost to the economy of money laundering and criminal finance in the UK. [905482]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The social and economic costs of organised crime, of which money laundering is a key facilitator, total tens of billions of pounds a year. The Government are committed to tackling illicit finance in the UK and have implemented recent measures including the Criminal Finances Act 2017 and the updated money laundering regulations, both of which were brought into law in the past year.

David Hanson: The cross-party Foreign Affairs Committee said only yesterday that the Government should show stronger political leadership in tackling the importing of dirty money into the United Kingdom. Is it not time that the Government supported the Labour Front Bench's proposals for an overseas register of interests?

John Glen: I acknowledge the report of the Select Committee. This Government stand by the rule of law. We do not do random confiscations but, alongside the work being undertaken, work is under way across Whitehall to examine what further steps are necessary. I am eager that we go as far as we can, and we must do so in ways that are consistent with our values.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I associate myself with the Chancellor's eloquent words on the Manchester tragedy. I also commend the emergency services that operated on that day.

"The Government cannot afford to turn a blind eye as kleptocrats and human rights abusers use the City of London to launder their ill-gotten funds".

Not my words but the words of yesterday's Foreign Affairs Committee report. For eight years this Government have turned a blind eye to the flow of dirty money through the City. Not only have they delayed until 2021 the introduction of a full public register of overseas companies that own UK property but they have refused to introduce the tougher scrutiny and regulation of City flotations that we have demanded, and they have failed to broaden the definition of "politically exposed persons" to include more individuals linked to crime or criminal regimes.

Will the Government do as the Foreign Affairs Committee has demanded and start taking money laundering and tax avoidance seriously by bringing forward the date for the register of overseas companies that own property in the UK?

John Glen: We will continue to take these matters very seriously. We will freeze Russian state assets where we have evidence that they will be used to threaten the life or property of UK nationals and residents. As the

Prime Minister made very clear in her statement to the House, the National Crime Agency will bring all UK capabilities to bear against serious criminals and corrupt elites. As somebody who has experienced that directly in my constituency in recent months, I stand by the Prime Minister's statement. There is no place for these people and their money in our country.

John McDonnell: That is just not good enough. We were promised a register in 2015, and we are still having to wait another three years. The Government are letting the crooks, the tax avoiders and the money launderers off the hook again. They have failed to introduce and enforce stricter due diligence for companies as registered companies, they have failed to take on the service providers that set up these laundering scheme, and they have refused to legislate to create a new offence of failing to prevent money laundering. Those are all amendments that the Opposition tabled to the recent Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill. The people of this country are entitled to ask why this Government are soft on tax evaders and money launderers.

There is another issue that has to be addressed today, as highlighted by the allegations against Lycamobile. Will the Government bring forward legislation requiring any political party found to have accepted donations from money launderers and tax evaders to forfeit or return that money?

John Glen: Obviously, it is impossible for a Minister to comment on live cases, but we will continue to use powers to disrupt and pursue money launderers and terrorists. We will use the anti-corruption strategy, and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security and Economic Crime is committed to using the National Economic Crime Centre to pursue those who need pursuing, but we will do so within the rule of law, consistent with the values of this country.

Tax Evasion

16. **Laura Smith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): What steps he has taken to give Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs the appropriate powers and resources to tackle tax evasion. [905484]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Government have brought in more than 100 measures to clamp down on tax avoidance, evasion and non-compliance since 2010, and the associated powers that HMRC has had in that respect. We have protected and brought in £175 billion across that period, which is substantially more than we invest in our national health service every year.

Laura Smith: Almost 15,000 HMRC and Valuation Office Agency jobs have been lost since 2010, and that is alongside tax office closures up and down the country. With potential changes to our customs border on the horizon, does the Chancellor not agree that now would be the time to invest in HMRC, and put a stop to all planned cuts and closures?

Mel Stride: I am pleased to be able to inform the hon. Lady that we have been investing heavily in HMRC to clamp down on the issues she has raised—we are talking about some £2 billion since 2010. We have 23,000 staff

in HMRC engaged in that purpose and we consequently have about the lowest tax gap in the entire world, at 6%, which is far lower than it was in any year under the previous Labour Government.

Topical Questions

T1. [905495] **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): My principal responsibility is to ensure economic stability and the continued prosperity of the British people, and I will do so by building on the plans set out in the autumn Budget and the spring statement. The Government's balanced approach to the public finances enables us to give households, businesses and our public services targeted support in the near term, and to invest in the future of this country, while also being fair to the next generation by at last beginning to reduce a national debt that is far too large.

Tom Brake: On prosperity, Mark Carney has just said that household incomes are now about £900 lower than was forecast in May 2016, before the referendum. How much lower still does the Chancellor estimate household incomes will be when the UK leaves the customs union and the single market? When will he publish his analysis?

Mr Hammond: On the publication of Government analysis, I have made it clear on several occasions that once Parliament is being asked to vote on a proposal—on a package—it will be appropriate for the Government to publish the analysis that they have, to make sure that that debate is as informed as possible. The future trajectory of household incomes will depend, in part, on the quality of the deal we negotiate as we exit the EU, and we are focused on getting the very best deal for British jobs, British prosperity and British businesses.

T2. [905496] **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Much champagne, or, in the more discerning households, English or Welsh sparkling wine, was drunk at the weekend, so what is the Chancellor doing financially to help promote and expand this excellent domestic wine industry? Post Brexit, will he address the anomaly whereby fizz is taxed more than still wine, which has a higher alcohol volume?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): I know that my hon. Friend represents some of the finest English sparkling wine vineyards, and I am pleased to say that some new ones have recently opened in Norfolk. We now have record exports of more than £100 million a year of our fantastic sparkling wine and we will continue to look at our policies to promote this brilliant product.

T9. [905503] **Laura Pidcock** (North West Durham) (Lab): Contrary to the out-of-touch outlook presented by the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), Eurostat figures show regional inequality in the UK, measured in output per hour, to be the worst in Europe. There is a massive disparity across England, with households in the south-east, the richest area of the UK, having more than double the wealth of those in the

north-east, where my constituency is. When will the Treasury finally act to meaningfully tackle this ongoing injustice?

Mr Philip Hammond: The hon. Lady focuses rightly on output per hour. The problem is a productivity gap between the regions of the UK and the most prosperous areas of London. We have to close that productivity gap. That is in the interest of not only those individual regions, but our overall national economy. We will do so by investing in public infrastructure and in skills, and by ensuring that the conditions are right for business investment, both domestic and foreign.

T3. [905497] **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I have a constituent who, despite having ample equity in her home and never having been in arrears with her payments, is unable to extend her mortgage beyond the age of 75 because of Government rules. That means that she will have to sell the house that she loves. Will my hon. Friend look urgently at whether those rules are absolutely necessary?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Lenders are not restricted from extending mortgages beyond the age of 75, as long as the consumer can demonstrate affordability. Several lenders are currently looking into this issue. There is considerable merit in interest-only retirement mortgages.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): What action are the Government taking to tackle payroll and umbrella companies, some of which—not all—are used to perpetuate bogus self-employment and undermine terms and conditions?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): We are looking very closely at this policy area, not least in respect of the Matthew Taylor review of the different ways in which individuals choose to work. The Government's overriding objective is to make sure that the way an individual works is reflected in the way they are taxed, and that they are taxed properly.

T4. [905498] **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Some of my constituents have reported ongoing confusion about child benefit. Some who admit that they have claimed child benefit inadvertently have not been told of the money that they owe to HMRC until interest has accumulated for as long as five years. What more can HMRC do to communicate errors more quickly?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I can reassure him that HMRC has written to a total of 800,000 people to inform them of the issue he has raised, which is also set out and made clear on the very first page of the child benefit application form. I can also reassure him that we will review this policy area in the current period to see how we can make changes going forward.

T6. [905500] **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The Royal Bank of Scotland branch in Wick in my constituency has now closed, and a sad sight that is. Last week, we heard that the Homebase branch is also to close. The Chancellor may say that we

have to accept change and live with it, but these are hammer blows for a community such as Wick, and I begin to wonder when we will see tumbleweed blowing down the street. Does the Chancellor agree that we should carry out some kind of assessment of the impact of such closures on the local economies of places like Wick and Caithness, before it is too late?

John Glen: It is a matter for banks to make commercial decisions on the basis of their assessments, and there are rules on how they inform the affected constituents. I am, though, very concerned about the situation in rural and sparsely populated areas. I shall visit Scotland over the summer recess to address some of the issues that the hon. Gentleman has raised.

T5. [905499] **Trudy Harrison** (Copeland) (Con): I welcomed the Treasury's recently closed consultation on single-use plastics. Will my hon. Friend update the House on what his Department intends to do next to tackle this problem?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): Sadly, it is a rare day on which a Treasury call for evidence on tax stirs the enthusiasm of the general public, but this one has. We received a record 130,000 submissions from throughout the country. We are determined to take the issue seriously and to tackle the scourge of single-use plastics. The Chancellor has been clear that we want to do so in a way that both tackles the environmental issues and drives innovation to support the jobs of the future.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I am sure that Ministers will be just as concerned as the rest of us about the startling revelations about the conduct of Lloyds and HBOS outlined in the Project Turnbull report. Will the Treasury now demand that, after three years, the Financial Conduct Authority pulls its finger out to expedite its investigation into this matter? Has the Treasury received any requests from police authorities to fund appropriate investigations into criminal activities? If so, will it look favourably on them?

John Glen: The hon. Gentleman rightly points out that the events at HBOS in Reading constituted criminal activity. As such, it was right that those responsible were brought to justice. He referred to a report by an internal employee; that matter should be taken seriously by the FCA and is being taken seriously by Lloyds, and it will be followed up on in due course.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am very keen to accommodate Back Benchers, as always.

T7. [905501] **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend tell the House how much additional tax revenue has been secured since 2010 by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs through tackling avoidance, evasion and non-compliance, and will he confirm that this policy will continue to exist in the Government?

Mel Stride: I am very pleased to inform my hon. Friend that we have raised and protected £175 billion since 2010 by clamping down on evasion, avoidance

and non-compliance. That comes as a direct result of investing in HMRC to the tune of £2 billion, and has resulted in the lowest tax gap in the world.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Colleagues can help each other by being very brief, which I am sure they will be.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): With child poverty set to increase by another 1.5 million by 2022, according to the Economic Council for Equality, what will the Treasury be doing to help the very poorest households?

Elizabeth Truss: What we have seen in the past few years, since 2015, is a 7% rise in the real wages of people on the lowest incomes, and a reduction in income inequality.

T8. [905502] **Craig Mackinlay** (South Thanet) (Con): With the full phasing in of the residents' nil-rate band for inheritance tax by 2020, a couple will potentially be able to leave £1 million free of inheritance tax to descendants. That is all very welcome, but having worked through the legislation in a real example, it seems unduly complex. Will my right hon. Friend now consider simplifying the law to make the overall IHT allowance a simple, no-nonsense £500,000 each and remove the complexity of the residents' nil-rate band rules?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend talks about complexity. The Office for Tax Simplification is looking into the way in which inheritance tax and the regime operate. Changing the way that tax reliefs operate in the way that he describes would add very significant cost. However, we do, of course, keep all taxes under review.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): The TUC estimates that the number of working households in poverty has risen by 1 million since 2010. Inaction on low-paid, insecure work and punitive welfare reform measures have led to record numbers of people accessing food banks. A responsible Government would measure food insecurity to create policies that end hunger. My Food Insecurity Bill does that. Why will the Government not back it?

Elizabeth Truss: We are the Government who have introduced the national living wage. We have reduced tax bills for those on the lowest incomes, and we are keeping our food market competitive and have some of the lowest food prices in Europe.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The UK productivity and prosperity funds are meant to benefit all local authorities across the United Kingdom. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to talk about how Scottish local authorities can apply directly to those funds?

Mr Philip Hammond: Yes.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The cap on charges on payday loans legislated for by Parliament has made a huge difference in bringing down the costs, but it is now more expensive for a person to go into an unarranged overdraft at their own bank. Will the Government look to extend that legislation to cap also the rip-off fees and charges put on customers by our banks?

John Glen: The hon. Lady makes a very sound point. The FCA is looking into four aspects of that. It is reporting next week, and I look forward to hearing what it has to say.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): In the autumn statement, the Chancellor announced the extension of the railcard from age 26 to 30. When will my constituents be able to take advantage of that?

Mr Philip Hammond: A pilot railcard for that age group was launched as a trial, and was fully subscribed very quickly. The Department for Transport will be announcing in due course when the continuation of the scheme will take place.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): As the Minister knows, the communities that I represent in Carmarthenshire received the highest form of EU structural aid. Will he give a guarantee that they will not lose a single penny following the introduction of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund?

Mr Hammond: As I think I have already said earlier in this session, we will be consulting, during the course of this year, on the design of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the scope and scale of the fund and how the money in the fund should be allocated. I look forward to the hon. Gentleman's input to that consultation.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Research has shown that those who live in rural areas are getting hit harder at the fuel pump than those in urban areas. Can my right hon. Friend update me on what his Department is doing to ensure that motorists in Angus, and indeed across the United Kingdom, have their taxes cut?

Mel Stride: I am clearly not going to speculate about future tax changes from the Dispatch Box this morning, but I point out that we have frozen fuel duty for eight successive years at a cost to the Exchequer of over £40 billion.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): A Home Affairs Committee report published in summer 2016 found that the suspicious activity reporting system intended for use by the banks to crack down on money laundering was not fit for purpose. The Committee demanded immediate reform, but the Government stated that they would implement the reforms only by 2018. In the light of the Foreign Affairs Committee report on Russia, criminal financing and the UK, will the Minister immediately bring forward plans to reform and improve the system, as was recommended two whole years ago?

John Glen: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the response I gave earlier. The Government are taking forward a range of options, but I will examine the issue he raises and write to him.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): The people of Bloxwich will soon be hearing more about blockchain. Will the Chancellor confirm that the Government will continue to invest in this innovative technology to keep the public's data safe?

Mr Speaker: Sounds fascinating, and I think we are going to hear more about it.

Mr Philip Hammond: The Government are committed to exploring all technologies that will keep data safe and create opportunities for innovation. Blockchain is one such technology, but the Government will also be examining other even more innovative distributive ledger technologies.

Mr Speaker: I look forward to learning more about blockchain. I am uninitiated on the matter, as the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) can tell, but I feel sure that he will put me in the picture ere long.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The Governor of the Bank of England has stated that economic uncertainty caused by the Brexit vote will knock 5% off wage growth and is costing the UK economy £10 billion a year. Does the Chancellor agree with the Governor?

Mr Hammond: We have not yet concluded our negotiations with the European Union, so it is impossible to make any assessment of the impact of our departure until we know what the future relationship with the EU will be. This Government's agenda is to get the best possible deal for Britain that protects jobs, prosperity and businesses, so that we can protect our existing trade with the EU as well as build new trade opportunities beyond Europe.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) need not worry; I am perfectly clear that he wishes to give us his thoughts. I am saving him up. It would be a pity to squander him at too early a stage of our proceedings.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): Today's figures from the Office for National Statistics reveal that we are at the lowest level of public borrowing since 2006. Will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury set out what that will mean for future investment in public services, as opposed to maxing out paying off the nation's credit card?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right that we have successfully turned the economy around. We have brought the deficit down, and next year, for the first time in many years, we will see debt fall as a proportion of GDP—*[Interruption.]* Some Members are laughing, but the same people are proposing that we increase our debt by half a trillion pounds and push our country into penury.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What will ministers do to support the "Great Western Cities" initiative, which promotes collaboration between Bristol, Newport and Cardiff and has enormous potential for the wider region?

Robert Jenrick: We are already engaging with that important initiative. We continue to support the Mayor of the West of England in Bristol, and we are investing over £600 million through the Swansea and Cardiff city deals.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Manufacturing accounts for 24% of the west midlands economy but, as others pointed out earlier, there are skills shortages.

Will the Chancellor therefore support any bid from the Mayor of the West Midlands for a devolution deal to take over responsibility for skills from the Department for Education?

Mr Philip Hammond: I am tempted to wonder whether my hon. Friend might have discussed that question with the Mayor of the West Midlands before asking it. It would be remiss of me to stand at the Dispatch Box and say that I would accept any bid, but I am certainly willing to consider any proposals from the Mayor of the West Midlands, or from any other elected mayor, to address the skills challenge that we face across the country.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Several of my constituents who are highly skilled migrants made entirely legitimate and timely changes to their tax returns and are now facing removal by the Home Office under immigration rule 322(5). Will a Treasury Minister confirm that people should make entirely legitimate changes to their tax returns? Will they also have a conversation

with their Home Office colleagues to prevent these highly skilled contributors from being removed from the UK?

Mel Stride: The answer to the hon. Lady's question is that people should clearly continue to make appropriate changes to their tax returns. I reassure her and the House that Treasury Ministers and HMRC officials are working closely across Government—particularly with the Home Office—on the issues that she raised in order to ensure that we get these matters right.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): The Government have decided not to proceed with the legislation that they committed to bring forward to protect consumers from the rip-off practice of logbook loans, despite the Bill being prepared and ready to go through the accelerated procedure. Will the Minister explain why he is prepared to allow innocent buyers to continue to be exploited through this outdated, misused legislation?

John Glen: The FCA is looking at a range of options, but I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss her concerns on this matter as soon as possible.

Transport Emissions: Urban Areas

12.40 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps his Department will be taking to improve transport emissions in our urban areas.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Mr Speaker, thank you for granting this urgent question.

Air pollution is the greatest environmental threat to human health in this country and the fourth biggest public health killer after cancer, obesity and heart disease. Today marks the publication of the latest stage in this Government's determined efforts to reduce and reverse the impact of air pollution on our health and on our natural environment. Our clean air strategy consultation, published today, outlines steps that we can all take to reduce the emission of harmful gases and particulate matter from all the sources that contribute to polluted air.

It is important to recognise, as I know my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) does, that air pollution is generated by a wide variety of sources—from the fuel used for domestic heating to the application of fertilisers on agricultural land, and from the use of chemicals in industry to sea, rail, air and road transport. The strategy published today outlines specific steps that we can take to reduce the use of the most polluting fuels, to manage better the use of manures and slurries on agricultural land, and to ensure that non-road mobile machinery is effectively policed, among other measures.

My hon. Friend asks specifically about urban transport pollution. Last year, the Government published their UK plan for tackling roadside nitrogen dioxide concentrations. The plan allocated over £3 billion to help to reduce harmful NO_x emissions, including £475 million to local authorities to enable them to develop their own air quality plans. Since then we have been working with local authorities to help them to deliver specific solutions. We have also issued ministerial directions to 61 local authorities to ensure that they live up to their shared responsibilities.

Our plan committed us to phasing out the sale of conventional diesel and petrol cars by 2040 and taking them off the road altogether by 2050. This is more ambitious than any European Union requirement and puts Britain in the lead among major developed economies. Alongside that commitment we are dedicating £1.5 billion to the development of zero and ultra-low emission vehicles, including support for new charging points across the country.

We were of course helped in the preparation of our clean air strategy by the excellent report produced earlier this year by the Chairs of the Select Committee on Health, the Select Committee on Transport and the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. In their excellent report on air quality, the joint Select Committees recommended introducing a new clean air Act. We will indeed be introducing primary legislation to clean up our air. They suggested that we initiate a new health campaign. As the Secretary of

State for Health has emphasised, we will be introducing a personal messaging system to ensure that those most at risk receive the information that they need about pollution risks.

It was also recommended that we place health and environment, rather than simply technical compliance, at the centre of our strategy. We do that with ambitious new targets that match World Health Organisation metrics on improving air quality. Of course, we were also asked to reduce emissions from tyres and braking—the so-called Oslo effect—and today we have announced action to work with manufacturers to do just that.

Emissions have fallen consistently since 2010, and my predecessors in this role are to be commended for the action that they have taken, but today's strategy marks the most ambitious steps yet to accelerate our progress towards cleaner air. I commend the strategy to the House.

Neil Parish: I thank the Secretary of State very much for publishing the clean air strategy today. I know that he feels very passionately about this and works very strongly to get our air cleaner in this country. I also welcome the proposals for improving air quality. That demonstrates progress. However, I am concerned that the strategy is not as wide-ranging as it could be. I welcome the fact that we seem to be cleaning up our wood-burning stoves. We also need to deal with agricultural pollution but, in particular, we need to deal with the hotspots in our inner cities.

The strategy says that, to reduce particulate emissions from tyre and brake wear, the Government will work with international partners to develop new international regulations for particulate emissions from tyres and brakes through the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. I very much welcome that, but is it adequate? To cut the levels of particulate matter from vehicles, the Government should reduce the need for private vehicles in congested urban areas by improving public transport and by making sure that public transport is much cleaner. We have done a lot in London but we need to do much across the rest of our cities in this great country.

It is not clear that the Government have taken on board our report's key finding that Departments are not necessarily working together effectively. This is not a criticism of the Secretary of State; it is very much to say that we need to work more with Transport to deliver many of the solutions.

Will the Secretary of State support our calls for conventional petrol and diesel engine cars to be phased out by 2040? Will he offer more support and resources to local councils to improve their air quality so that this can be tackled at a local level as well as a national level? Can we be sure that all the monitoring systems through DEFRA and through local authorities actually work?

I welcome the fact that there will be new powers for the Transport Secretary to compel manufacturers to recall vehicles for any failures in their emissions control systems and to make tampering illegal. I still continue to ask why Volkswagen has got away with what it did and why we did not do enough to make sure that it was brought to book. That is not you, Secretary of State—that is the Transport Secretary. However, can the Secretary of State offer more support for cleaner fuels that consumers can use in vehicles, especially bioethanol—E10—in petrol?

[Neil Parish]

That is good not only for the environment but for farmers who supply the wheat that makes the bioethanol in the first place.

Mr Speaker: Whew! The hon. Gentleman can now breathe.

Michael Gove: As you have indicated, Mr Speaker, I think we are all admiring of the Select Committee Chair for managing to pack into his allotted time so much that was useful. I will do my very best to reply appropriately.

My hon. Friend is quite right to draw attention to the way in which tyres and brakes generate particulate matter that finds its way into the air and contributes to air pollution. We will be working with manufacturers, exactly as he says, in order to deal with this method of pollution. He is also right that particulate matter is a particular problem with regard to public health. One of the biggest generators of particulate matter is domestic wood burning and coal burning. The clean air strategy goes further than ever before in making sure that we can deal with both those means of generating particulate matter.

My hon. Friend asks that we improve public transport. Specifically with regard to NO_x emissions, the diesel vehicles on which so many rely for public transport—buses and so on—do need to be modernised. We work with local authorities to ensure that there is appropriate retrofitting of these vehicles so that the diesel emissions that contribute to poor air quality can be effectively dealt with. We are spending £475 million with local authorities to ensure that they can have bespoke solutions. That can involve the retrofitting of public transport. It can also involve engineering solutions to bring down the concentration of harmful emissions in particular areas.

My hon. Friend makes a point about the 2040 target. I completely agree that it is important to hit that target. He also draws attention to the fact that some motor manufacturers, in effect, attempted to get around regulations in order to produce vehicles for sale that did not meet the requirements for air quality that we would all want to see. We can all reflect on the way in which the regulation, which was of course fixed at EU level, did not work effectively. There has been reference, and I know there will be subsequent reference, to the court cases that have found a number of EU countries, including Britain, to be in breach of EU law on this matter. The truth is that one of the reasons Britain and other countries are in breach of EU law is that there are vehicles on our streets that had technical compliance with EU rules but, in terms of real-world emissions, were not fit for our use.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): What we needed from the Government today was a comprehensive clean air strategy to show that they are really serious about tackling this public health emergency, but what we have instead is yet another consultation, which has a focus on emissions from agriculture and wood burning and is weak on cutting roadside pollution from diesel vehicles. It is worth remembering that, since the general election, there have been 25 DEFRA consultations and not one piece of primary legislation delivered.

We know that air pollution is responsible for at least 40,000 premature deaths every year. We know that it is particularly harmful to our children and our vulnerable elderly people. Effective national action must be taken to address the emissions from road transport that are contributing to illegal and harmful levels of pollution. The UK is currently routinely responsible for exceeding the legal levels of pollution. Today's strategy states that the Government aim to halve the number of people living in unsafe levels of pollution by 2025, but that is simply not good enough. If today's announcement is the extent of their ambition, it poses a serious question about whether this Conservative Government can really be trusted with our environment and with dealing with illegal air pollution after the UK leaves the EU.

The strategy still does not legally provide for a network of mandatory clean air zones, which DEFRA's own analysis shows is the quickest and most cost-effective way to bring NO_x levels down to legal levels. Yet again, we see more shunting of new responsibilities on to our cash-strapped local authorities, which have been cut to the bone by the Government's unrelenting austerity agenda. All the new promises we have heard today will mean very little if local councils do not have the money or the resources to implement them.

The Government say time and again that they are committed to this being the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we inherited it in, but I see no evidence of actual action being taken to deliver that. Anything being mooted by the Government on tackling air pollution will be effective only if there is a serious and independent environmental regulator after Brexit to hold the Government to account, but the Government's recently announced environment watchdog has been roundly condemned as entirely toothless.

Labour has been calling for primary legislation on air quality since the last election. This Government only ever take action on illegal air pollution when they have been held over a barrel in the courts. I remind the House that there have been three legal challenges and a referral to the European Court of Justice. When will the Government treat this issue with the seriousness that it deserves? The time for half-measures and public consultation has to end. We need real action now to tackle this public health emergency.

Michael Gove: I thank the hon. Lady for her points. She asks for a comprehensive strategy. That is what we have produced today. She specifically refers to our target to ensure that half of the population live in areas that meet World Health Organisation standards for air quality by 2025. What she omitted to tell the House is that this Government are putting forward a more ambitious aspiration for the cleanliness of our air than any other Government in a developed nation. It seems that, in her desire to be grudging, she failed to share with the House the detail of our ambition.

The hon. Lady asked about clean air zones. Clean air zones can be implemented by local authorities if they believe that that is the right solution. We on the Government Benches believe in the "local" in local government. It is right for local authorities to make an appropriate decision, depending on the circumstances in that area. A one-size-fits-all approach imposed from the centre may be appropriate in the Marxist-Leninist world of the Corbynistas, but we believe that it is appropriate to

work with local authorities and metro Mayors. When necessary, we will apply ministerial directions, but it is appropriate to have the right approach for each individual area.

The hon. Lady asked about primary legislation. Let me remind her that a Labour Government were in place for 13 years, and how many pieces of primary legislation did they bring in on air quality? How many? It was a Conservative Government who brought in the Clean Air Act 1956 and a Conservative Government who brought in clean air legislation when John Major was Prime Minister, but when Labour was in power, we did not have clean air Acts—we had dirty diesel subsidies.

It was the Labour Government who introduced a deliberate ramping up of the number of diesel cars on our streets. We had a confession recently from none other than the hon. Member for Brent North, a man to whom I always pay close attention. Barry Gardiner admitted—it is perhaps not the first confession he will be making this week—that there is “absolutely no question” that the decision the Labour Government took on diesel was “the wrong decision” and:

“Certainly the impact of that decision has been a massive problem for public health in this country.”

Until we have an apology from those on the Labour Front Bench for the errors that they made, we will take their words on air pollution for the hot air that they manifestly are.

Mr Speaker: I always richly enjoy the Secretary of State’s performances, almost as richly as he does himself. I hope, however, he will not take it amiss if I gently point out that to refer to the hon. Member for Brent North is in order, but to name him is not.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Shocking!

Mr Speaker: It is shocking, as the right hon. Gentleman observes in a disorderly manner from a sedentary position.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The clean air strategy rightly sets out the compelling case for action to reduce public exposure to air pollution in order to save lives and improve the quality of life for many. We also know that there is a compelling case to get Britain moving and get us out of our cars, and that cycling and walking, even where there is a lot of traffic, exposes people to less air pollution than driving. Does the Secretary of State share my disappointment that there is only a single paragraph in the strategy on active travel? I urge him to go further by strengthening measures to get people out of their cars and, where possible, on to their bikes and walking for their benefit.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a vital point. Today’s strategy deals with a number of sources of air pollution, and I commend my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for showing leadership on precisely the area that she draws attention to. We have spent £1.2 billion on a cycling and walking investment strategy. When my colleague the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) was Mayor of London, he introduced a cycle lane network across the capital, which has contributed hugely to an increase in the number of people cycling across the capital. I absolutely believe that we need to have a switch away

from an over-reliance on traditional internal combustion engines, towards new modes of transport, and part of that is making sure that we can cycle and walk wherever possible.

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): In Scotland we have achieved progressively clean air over recent years through increasingly strict control of industrial emissions, tighter fuel and emissions standards for road vehicles and control of smoke from domestic premises. However, after going to court numerous times, the UK Government are not taking serious action. They are just dragging their feet by announcing yet another consultation. As has just been said, the Secretary of State has issued more than 25 consultations since the 2017 general election, but none has yet produced new laws.

The Government’s own research shows that clean air zones are the most effective solution to air pollution, so why are they ignoring their own advice? Surely they should follow the Scottish National party Government, who are funding low emission zones to take the most polluting vehicles out of the most polluted areas of Scotland. The Health Secretary has said that

“Air pollution is contributing to a national health crisis.”

Why is the Environment Secretary ignoring his own Cabinet colleagues and not taking serious action now?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He makes the point about the number of consultations we have brought forward. Call me old-fashioned, but I think it is appropriate to consult before one legislates. I think it is absolutely right to make sure that we take account of the views of the citizens of this country and interested parties before moving to legislate. However, I note that in his demand for us to legislate was implicit Scottish National party support for the laws that we will bring forward. I will bank that kind offer of support from the SNP for the legislation that we will feel necessary to bring forward in due course.

The hon. Gentleman says that the Scottish Government have shown leadership on this issue. Indeed, I am happy to acknowledge that there are members of the Scottish Government, whether it is Roseanna Cunningham or others, who take an approach to the environment that dovetails with our own, and I enjoy working with them. The hard work behind the scenes that both Governments exhibit to improve our environment is sometimes not reflected in the exchanges we have on the Floor of the House, so I want to take this opportunity to thank the Scottish Government for the work that they do behind the scenes to advance our shared environment. It is vital, as we leave the European Union, that there is effective working across the four constituent parts of the United Kingdom to achieve the goals that we all share.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Is the Secretary of State aware that there is action he could take now that would not cost the Government money and would not require him to legislate further? Regulation 98 of the Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986 states that it is already an offence to leave an engine idling when stuck in traffic or at traffic lights. Is he aware of Westminster City Council’s “Don’t Be Idle” campaign? Why do we not put some

[Andrew Selous]

beef behind that campaign, spread it across the country and do something now that would really help, would not cost money and would make a big difference?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The phenomenon of idling engines—often, ironically, outside the very schools whose children we most want to protect from deteriorating air quality—does require action to be taken. I commend my hon. Friend for pointing out the leadership shown by Westminster, among many other councils, and I believe we need a wider application of the already existing powers that local authorities have to deal with this.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Our joint Select Committees report called for ambitious, co-ordinated cross-departmental action, yet there is virtually nothing in the Secretary of State's new strategy to tackle the impact of road traffic. As the Chair of the Health Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) has said, modal shift gets two paragraphs and active travel just three sentences. He has clearly rejected a ban on diesel and petrol cars before 2040. Can he point to a single measure or funding pot that he is announcing today that will better align urban planning, public transport and fiscal incentives, as our Committees recommended?

Michael Gove: It is important to realise that there was widespread recognition in the report produced by the hon. Lady and other Select Committee Chairs that road transport was simply one of the sources of air pollution. In this strategy, we are complementing what was already announced last year in our roadside NO_x emissions strategy, with action on ports, air travel and trains, which is a signal of the determined efforts we are taking across the Government to deal with all the sources of air pollution.

The hon. Lady says that we should move faster than to get rid of internal combustion engines by 2040, but I have to say to her that no other major developed economy is taking that step. We need to take a balanced approach towards setting a firm deadline for moving away from conventional petrol and diesel engines, while also providing industry with the time to adjust.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Precisely what are my right hon. Friend's plans to interfere with my fireplaces and my bonfire?

Michael Gove: I know that my right hon. Friend is one of the most responsible dwellers in the New Forest. He would never burn wet wood or coal with a high level of bitumen; only the driest and most parched twigs will find their way on to his fire and he will use only the appropriate and less smoky coal. I also know that he lives in one of the most beautiful parts of rural Hampshire, and as a result any emissions he generates are unlikely to form a particularly toxic cloud.

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State is obviously immensely familiar with the right hon. Gentleman's domestic arrangements, and we are all greatly fortified by the knowledge of that important fact.

Sir Desmond Swayne: He is very kind, but quite right.

Mr Speaker: For the benefit of those attending to our proceedings, the right hon. Gentleman says that the Secretary of State is very kind, but quite right, so there we are. We all feel a bit better informed.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Over the past 30 years, the cost of motoring has fallen by 20%, while the cost of bus travel has risen by 64%. Will the Secretary of State do what he can to reverse those figures? Will he look in particular at the situation in Brighton and Hove? He has written to me about my concern that data on NO₂ exceedances in the city are not being taken properly into account by the Government. Does he acknowledge that we have such exceedances in our city, and if so, will he look again at our grounds for appealing the decision not to award us money from the clean bus technology fund?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. I will look at that decision. I recognise that it is important to have accurate measuring of exceedances, but as the hon. Lady will acknowledge, one of the reasons why we have them is that the current Euro 6 diesel cars have been found to emit six times the lab test limit on average, and the new regulations that have come into effect do not accurately ensure that we can bring down exceedances to the level that we both want to see.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I appreciate that my right hon. Friend is a friend, rightly, of the bees and of the fish, but he also needs to be a friend of hard-pressed motorists. The fact is that, as he acknowledged, diesel motorists were told by the previous Government to buy such cars, and his plans will give a green light to many local authorities up and down the country to whack taxes on to diesel car owners. Will my right hon. Friend look at this again? It has happened in London, and motorists are taxed far too heavily, so will he change these plans?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend has been a consistent champion of small businesses and of those who rely on diesel vehicles to provide the services on which we all, more broadly, rely. As the nature of the debate in the House indicates, a balance needs to be struck. That balance is between recognising that there is an appropriate place in the next couple of decades for diesel as part of the transport mix—where either the private sector or local authorities can find support for a scrappage scheme, we will of course endorse and do what we can to facilitate that—and, as well as making sure that small business can thrive, ensuring that our children, critically, are protected from the greatest concentrations of pollution that we find in some urban areas.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Secretary of State is right that local authorities have a big role to play in this, but they could do an awful lot more if they had the resources. Central Government have an even bigger role to play. In Tinsley in my constituency, NO₂ levels are regularly above safe limits because it is next to the M1 motorway, which is a central Government responsibility. What are the Government going to do about that, apart from adding an extra lane to the motorway? In Sheffield city centre, the pollution hotspot is around Sheffield station because

of diesel trains, yet this Government have just cancelled the electrification of the midland main line. When are we going to get some joined-up government on this matter?

Michael Gove: I am a great admirer of the hon. Gentleman for all the work he has done both to ensure that the case for appropriate support for local government is made and to ensure, when it comes to planning, that we all take a thoughtful approach that takes the environment into account. However, there is one more thing he could do, which is to have a word with his Labour colleagues on Sheffield City Council and ask them to stop the tree felling campaign in which they are engaged. If we want to deal effectively with air pollution, one of the things we can do is to continue to ensure that trees—they not only act as a source of beauty and natural wonder but contribute to the fight against air pollution—are allowed to survive, rather than being chopped down by a council that is, I am afraid, in thrall to its own officers.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): A properly targeted diesel scrappage scheme would enable us to get rid of the most polluting cars on our streets, and if it was properly targeted it could be done without hammering those people on the lowest incomes. Will my right hon. Friend commit to pressing the Treasury to agree to such a scheme, because ultimately it will have to do so?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The success of any scrappage scheme depends on effective targeting. What we cannot do—it would be irresponsible—would be to use public money to subsidise people who are already making a choice to get rid of a particular vehicle. The deadweight cost associated with that would not be money appropriately spent. He makes the very good point that if we can effectively target such vehicles and find the individuals whom we can incentivise to move towards a green and more sustainable method of transport, we should of course support such measures. I am entirely open-minded about any proposals that might come forward, whether from metro Mayors, local authorities or others.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Has the Secretary of State noted the very striking finding in our joint Committees report that the fumes and pollution inside a vehicle are 10 times worse than those outside a vehicle? As part of the public information campaign that he has just announced, will he ensure that it is directed at parents who drive their children to school, thinking they are protecting them when they are actually doing them much more harm than if they walked or cycled, as well as exposing other people's children and families to more pollution and congestion?

Michael Gove: Absolutely spot on. I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for making that point. All of us need to know more about the sources of air pollution, and he is absolutely right. I did not appreciate that until the Select Committees brought it to my attention, and I am grateful to him for bringing it to the attention of a wider audience today.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): There are three hotspots in my own constituency all of which are in towns. What are we going to do to increase electric charging facilities in those places to overcome this problem?

Michael Gove: We have devoted £1.5 billion overall to supporting the growth of zero and ultra-low emissions vehicles, including a wider network of charge points, but I think there is more that we can do. One of the things I will be exploring with my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Transport and for Housing, Communities and Local Government is how we can do everything possible—both in planning and in the legislation that the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), is bringing forward—to build on the leadership that my hon. Friend has shown.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Everyone has the right to clean air, including people in villages such as North Hinksey and market towns such as Abingdon in my constituency, yet those places have hotspots, and those sorts of conurbations are not mentioned at all in the clean air strategy. Will the Secretary of State confirm that his ambitions extend to smaller conurbations, not just cities?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes a good point. There are concentrations of poor air quality not just in our major cities but in other areas. There can be a combination of factors, including roadside emissions and emissions from domestic heating. Critically, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, acknowledged, sometimes emissions also come from agriculture. The strategy commits us to providing support for all those sectors, to move towards a cleaner future.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): In my constituency, the badly thought through planning policy of the failing Labour council is failing properly to take into account the critical issue of air quality. How will today's announcement improve my constituents' lives, given that at the moment they are at the mercy of a failing Labour local authority?

Michael Gove: The powers envisaged in the consultation will allow local authorities to act on everything, from unwise choices made about domestic heat generation to making sure that some of the diesel machinery involved in construction and for other purposes is appropriately licensed and controlled. I note that, following recent local election results, it seems that the leadership shown by my hon. Friend has been recognised by voters in his constituency, who have moved away from their previous allegiance.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State outline progress on E10 regulations, on proper investment in hydrogen vehicles and on what is being done to tackle secondary generators and transport refrigeration units?

Michael Gove: On secondary generators and other generators of emissions, we are giving local authorities and others powers to deal with the consequences of poor air quality as a result of their deployment.

More broadly, on hydrogen and other vehicles, the Department for Transport is neutral about future technologies but supportive of the investment required to ensure that a suitable range of technologies is available.

[*Michael Gove*]

One of the key features of the legislation being brought forward by my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, which originated under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), is to facilitate precisely the type of innovation that the hon. Gentleman alludes to.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman in question is in our midst, and that fact will not have gone unnoticed.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that new primary legislation announced today will give authorities such as Cornwall Council the power they need to protect communities such as Tideford and Gunnislake in my constituency from air pollution?

Michael Gove: Absolutely; I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. We want to work in partnership, and local authorities such as Cornwall Council can make sure that the communities in her constituency—in particular the children who attend primary schools in those communities—can be protected from the impact of air pollution. I am grateful to her for championing much of the work in this consultation throughout her time in this House.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): The Secretary of State has repeatedly told the House that the UK leads the way in phasing out combustion engines by 2040, but he must keep up to date with current events in the German Bundesrat, which has already passed legislation for them to be phased out in Germany by 2030. We also believe that in China combustion engines will be phased out by 2030. That makes our policy a laughing stock in the world.

Michael Gove: There are some countries, including some outside the European Union such as Norway, that have a more ambitious target than our own. However, I do not think that the legislation has yet been given effect in Germany.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend may seek to control what goes into them, but may I invite him to confirm that he has no intention of introducing a ban on wood-burning stoves? Manufacturers, retailers and users of them in the UK will be listening very carefully to what he has to say. Such stoves are an important part of domestic heating.

Michael Gove: We have been working with the domestic heating industry to ensure that higher standards can prevail in future. We want to ensure that all stoves sold in future meet those new higher standards.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I commend to the Secretary of State the clean air Bill proposed by my colleague Simon Thomas in the National Assembly for Wales. In the spirit of the decentralised approach that he proposes, what consideration have the British Government given to devolving vehicle excise duty and fuel taxes to Wales, so that the Welsh Government can have a revenue stream to implement alternative transport solutions?

Michael Gove: I am all in favour of devolution, but any questions about vehicle excise duty or taxation are properly a matter for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. However, I met Simon Thomas and some of his colleagues from the Welsh Assembly a couple of weeks ago. I was hugely impressed by the work that they are doing, and I would like to work closely with the Assembly and the hon. Gentleman's colleagues.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Government's move towards phasing out petrol and diesel cars, but the key part will be the charging infrastructure, particularly for when people are away from home—when they are visiting Torbay this bank holiday, for example. Will the Secretary outline what plans the Government have to develop the necessary infrastructure?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We are investing £1.5 billion, but it is also important for us to reflect on where people are likely to find themselves at particular times of the year—now and in years to come. One of the things that many of us will be doing this coming bank holiday weekend will be visiting beautiful English seaside resorts such as Torbay. It is important that, as they move towards cleaner and greener forms of transport, people have the opportunity to enjoy the natural beauty of the southern riviera without polluting the air at the same time.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On the subject of natural beauty, Hull was one of 49 UK towns and cities that failed World Health Organisation standards for air pollution.

I want to return to the question raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). What discussions has the Secretary of State actually had with the Transport Secretary about the scrapping of rail electrification schemes and his championing of bimodal trains which, as I understand it, will still pollute the air?

Michael Gove: We have had extensive discussions with the Secretary of State for Transport, who has been leading efforts to ensure not only that we can scrap diesel trains altogether at an appropriate point, but that we can ensure that there are appropriate alternatives to those that exist at the moment.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The use of dirty coal to generate electricity in our country plummeted by 25% last year, and such generation now stands at less than 7% of the overall energy mix. Will my right hon. Friend recommit the Government to the ambitious target of getting rid of coal completely from the energy mix by 2024 and maintaining the UK's global leadership in this important field?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point and reminds us of the steps that we have already taken to ensure that we move towards cleaner methods of electricity generation. In that respect, I commend to the House the recent work of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, who has been outstanding in ensuring that we can make the transition to which my hon. Friend alludes.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Government are in the dock at the European Court of Justice for the premature deaths of 40,000 people a year. As we approach Brexit, is it not time that we had a clean air Act with the focus and priority to deliver the standards and enforcement institutions that we enjoy in Europe? We should at least match the 2030 targets for the Netherlands, Ireland and Germany so that we do not end up being the dirty, coughing man of Europe.

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point. He has been in the lead among Members in pressing for primary legislation, and we acknowledge the need for such legislation in the strategy. I know the point that the hon. Gentleman is trying to make—it was also made by the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis)—but it is important to remind the House that the vote in the Bundesrat was non-binding. What we have in this country are binding commitments that we are determined to meet, and that is a significant contrast.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): Yesterday I met representatives of Honda and BMW, both of which are determined to make a difference in this important area. Will the Secretary of State urge his colleagues to provide more clarity on the use of hybrid engines and technology as a way to help to reduce emissions year on year?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The existing motor companies will play a critical role in ensuring that we can move towards a more sustainable and cleaner method of providing personal transport. He is absolutely right that hybrids will have a role to play. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport will be saying more about that in due course, but I am very grateful to my hon. Friend and other Members who represent manufacturing and industrial sectors for the constructive way in which they have helped to bring people together.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I am sure that the Environment Secretary gets very frustrated with the Treasury dragging its feet on some of the initiatives he wants to push forward. It was recently reported that the £400 million plan for electric car charging infrastructure is being held up by the Treasury because it has not even recruited somebody to be in charge of the private sector investment element—it says it will recruit this summer—so will he please put a rocket under the Treasury and tell it that while people want to buy electric cars, they will not do so unless the infrastructure is in place?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for trying to present the issue in the way she did. The truth is that I cannot think of anyone in this House, apart from possibly my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings, who is cleaner—keener, rather—on investment. [*Laughter.*] He is very clean. Cleanliness is next to godliness. I do not think there is anyone in this House who is keener on moving towards ultra low emission vehicles than the Chancellor of the Exchequer. As Transport Secretary and in his current role, he has led efforts across the Government to make

sure we are moving in the right direction. I do not think it is at all fair to criticise him or the Treasury in that regard.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I declare an interest as the owner of two very efficient renewable fuel-burning wood stoves. On traffic emissions, it was recently discovered that the monitoring equipment in Shoreham high street had been broken for several years, which might explain the fact that Shoreham's air quality is always deemed to be good. Volunteers have now had to carry out those tests. If we are to be serious about the quality of the air, may we put a duty on local authorities to properly maintain accurate and reliable equipment?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I will investigate what we can do.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that rather than pursuing HS2, a greater priority would be the introduction of regional public transport schemes to electrify our rail lines, and to encourage the introduction of hydrogen and electric buses in our towns and cities?

Michael Gove: I do not think it should be a case of either/or.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): The development of electric vehicle battery technology will be crucial to encouraging a supply side revolution in the uptake of electric vehicles, which would help to reduce emissions in urban areas. What progress has the Secretary of State made, jointly with the Department for Transport, in this area?

Michael Gove: We have been working with not just the Department for Transport, but the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, to ensure that we can make Britain the most attractive home for new technologies. It is striking that great British inventors such as Sir James Dyson have dedicated themselves to ensuring that Britain can compete with competitors such as Elon Musk's Tesla to provide the right technology for clean, green, effective and sustainable transport in the future.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The clean air strategy says that during the transition to zero emission vehicles

“we will ensure the cleanest conventional vehicles are driven on our roads.”

The Secretary of State will know that most people buy second-hand cars, not new ones. Under changes introduced by this Government, vehicle excise duty rates for used cars registered after March 2017 make no distinction whatever between those that produce lower levels of carbon dioxide and pollutants that are harmful to air quality, and those that produce higher emissions. How is that compatible with a promise to ensure that the cleanest conventional vehicles are driven on our roads?

Michael Gove: It is the case that the increase in vehicle excise duty on new cars is helping to contribute to ensuring that local authorities receive the money they require to have appropriate clean air strategies. I think

[*Michael Gove*]

that any keen student of the second-hand car market would recognise that the value and resale value of diesels has fallen, reflecting the fact that people know that they need to move away from that polluting form of transport.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): With a characteristic mix of insight and eloquence, the Secretary of State has once again made the case for extending the electric charging infrastructure, thereby addressing one of the reasons why people do not buy electric cars. He will know that when we debated these matters in the House—he paid tribute to my pioneering of that legislation—one of the reasons for local authorities' frankly inconsistent application regarding on-street parking was that the guidance was not strong enough. Will he now ensure that all local authorities make provision for electric charging infrastructure on streets?

If I might just add, Mr Speaker, I initiated a competition as Minister for the design of such infrastructure. Will the Secretary of State reinvigorate that competition so that the charging infrastructure is one day as iconic as the pillar box or a Gilbert Scott telephone box?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend makes two very important points. On the first point, we absolutely need to make sure that the infrastructure is there, and his second point is also important. One of the reasons why we cherish the environment is natural beauty. When we think about the steps we take to safeguard and enhance natural beauty, we should think about man's contribution to making sure that the aesthetics around us reflect the best of us. The best of us is, of course, exemplified by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): My constituents and Londoners more generally want more ambitious measures implemented, and sooner, than are outlined in the Government's strategy. They breathe in toxic fumes on a daily basis. Why has London been exempted from the clean air fund?

Michael Gove: We have specific arrangements with the Mayor of London to ensure we can help him to meet his ambitions. I saw the Mayor last night. I do not expect him to endorse everything in this package, but I find his constructive approach to working with central Government to improve air quality heartening. We will continue to work with him. A little while back the Mayor himself said that while resolving road emissions was critical to improving air quality, there are many other things that the Government are required to do. It was partly a result of what the Mayor said that we brought forward the strategy today.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): There are 40,000 premature deaths nationally, with 10,000 in London, and the schools in my constituency fare among the worst. What impact assessment has the Secretary of State's Department done to consider how many deaths would be prevented under the new strategy compared with if the Government committed to a clean air Act and phasing out diesel engine use by 2030?

Michael Gove: One thing we have done is to work with the academic community. Indeed, I met some of its members yesterday at Imperial College, one of our best universities, to look at the impact of the steps we are already taking to improve public health and to save money for the Exchequer. By definition, that work is publicly available to all. I take on board the hon. Lady's point. We are bringing forward primary legislation. We can use the model that has been constructed to see how different impacts could be generated by different policies, and I look forward to sharing those results with her.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Emissions from road traffic cause the majority of air pollution in my constituency. Given that the M4 and traffic related to Heathrow are outside the purview of the London Mayor and the London Borough of Hounslow, how exactly will the Government ensure that post-Brexit regulatory regimes will have the same powers as their current European equivalents?

Michael Gove: On the first point, I want to make sure that, as we envisage the expansion of aviation capacity across the south-east, we do everything possible to make sure that all contributors to air quality in the relevant areas are taken properly into account as part of a balanced approach towards policy. On the second point, we are consulting on what shape a new environmental regulator should take.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Hope Street in my constituency has long been acknowledged as one of the most polluted streets in Scotland, so I am sure that the Secretary of State will have been as glad as I was to see that Councillor Anna Richardson is bringing forward a low emission zone in Glasgow as one of the first acts of the SNP city government. One of the inhibitors to the success of low emission zones is of course haulage and bus transport. Will he tell us a bit more about what conversations he has had with those industries about progressing to more environmentally friendly vehicles?

Michael Gove: We have been keen to make sure, certainly when it applies to buses and public transport, that we make money available to local authorities for appropriate retrofitting. Hauliers recognise that there will need to be a shift. One of the things we need to do—my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport is doing this—is to make sure that we can move to a more efficient method of haulage in the future.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I was pleased that the Secretary of State raised electric vehicles in his opening remarks, as I have been pursuing this issue since I came to this place. I have created a nine-point plan, which I raised with the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth and more recently with the roads Minister in a debate on electric vehicles in Westminster Hall. The ideas include matching Joint Air Quality Unit funding with Office for Low Emission Vehicles funding and getting three-phase electric points. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss all nine points of my plan?

Michael Gove: It will be a pleasure.

Mr Betts: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. A point of order would ordinarily come later. Does it appertain to these exchanges?

Mr Betts: Yes.

Mr Speaker: And is it uncontentious and not a continuation of debate, but an honest pursuit of truth by the Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee?

Mr Betts: It is an honest pursuit of truth, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Very good. I will give the hon. Gentleman the benefit of the doubt.

Mr Betts: I am sure that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs would not want an inaccurate statement to go uncorrected. He said that Sheffield City Council was felling trees and that that was adding to the pollution problems in the city. The truth is that while there has been some contention about the removal and replacement of some trees on some streets, overall there will be more trees in Sheffield at the end of the programme than at the beginning, and the city will have low-energy LED street lights throughout, which I hope the Secretary of State will welcome.

Mr Speaker: It is always useful to have a bit of additional information. We have learnt a bit more about the Sheffield tree situation, which is potentially reassuring. If the Secretary of State wishes to leap to his feet to respond, he is welcome to do so.

Michael Gove indicated dissent.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman signals that he is content, such is the—

Mr Betts: He agrees—thank you very much.

Mr Speaker: Well, I do not know whether the right hon. Gentleman agrees, but he gives no evidence of disagreement. The emollient tone of the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) has served his purpose for now—[*Interruption.*] Order. The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) chunters from a sedentary position that this is an explosive issue. I do not know whether it is—[*Interruption.*] Locally; well, that may well be so. Very good, honour is served.

Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe

1.31 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement regarding the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe following the new charges brought against her in Iran.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I thank the hon. Lady for her question and constancy in relation to the needs of her constituent and the families. We remain deeply concerned for all our dual national detainees in Iran, including Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe, and we are doing everything we can for them, including trying to secure access and ensure their welfare. We will continue to approach the case in a way that we judge is most likely to secure the outcome that we all want. Therefore, the hon. Lady and the House will forgive me if I am limited in my comments on her case and those of other dual nationals, both at the moment and in relation to any continuing developments.

The Prime Minister raised all our consular cases in a telephone call with President Rouhani on 13 May and the Foreign Secretary raised the cases in a meeting with Foreign Minister Zarif in Brussels last week. I also raised the cases with my contacts with Iran. Our ambassador in Tehran has raised concerns with the Iranians at the highest levels and spoke by telephone with Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe this Sunday. Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials are in regular contact with Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe's families.

Tulip Siddiq: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for his update, and I have a few questions for him. Will the Government make it clear today that they will condemn the new charges brought against my constituent and call for her immediate release? Ministers have said that they will not provide a running commentary on the case, but when we met the Foreign Secretary in November, he promised that he would leave no stone unturned. I press the Minister to update the house on how his strategy is being conducted in practice.

Will the Minister update the House on whether the historic debt owed by Britain to Iran has been paid, and when is the next court date scheduled? Nazanin spoke to our ambassador to Iran after meeting the judge, and she requested that he sign a formal letter of protest to the Iranian Government. Will the Minister confirm that this constitutes an overdue acceptance from the Iranian judiciary that Nazanin is indeed British? Will he say whether he anticipates that this will lead to further consular protections being granted? Will he today confirm that the ambassador will send the note of protest that Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe has requested? Will the Minister press the Iranian authorities to allow Nazanin temporary release to spend Gabriella's—her daughter who went with her to Iran—fourth birthday with her?

I finish by saying that I bring these questions to the House in good faith. All we want in West Hampstead is for Nazanin to return home. All our constituents, including her husband, Richard, who is in the Public Gallery today, believe that Nazanin is innocent. She is British,

[*Tulip Siddiq*]

and she deserves to know what her Government are doing to secure her release and to reunite her with her families back home.

Alistair Burt: I refer to remarks I made earlier about how we intend to conduct the case and the answers that I can give to the hon. Lady's questions. We remain of the assessment that a private, rather than public, approach is most likely to result in progress in Nazanin's case and ultimately, her release, which is all any of us want.

I can answer one or two questions. On diplomatic protection, the FCO is in discussion with Mr Ratcliffe and his legal representatives on the merits of a claim for diplomatic protection. It would be remiss of me to comment any further until these discussions have concluded. I am not making any comments about the charges or anything similar.

As I have said, our ambassador spoke to Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe on Sunday. He assured her that we continue to prioritise the case and do everything we can to bring about her release, including requesting consular access, requesting access to medical reports and requesting a temporary furlough so that she can indeed celebrate Gabriella's birthday with her family.

On the International Military Services issue, we do not share the view that the IMS debt or any other bilateral issue is the reason for Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe's detention. The UK has always been clear, both publicly and in private discussions with Iran, that the two issues are entirely separate, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has publicly stated on several occasions that there is no link. We will meet our legal obligations in relation to the debt, and funding to settle the debt was transferred to the High Court several years ago.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend ensure that Foreign Office advice relies on the fact that this experience is a powerful corrective to any notion of dual nationals that they might return to Iran?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. We publish our advice on travel to Iran on our website—it is public—and the issue of dual nationals is specifically mentioned.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. It is deeply regrettable that we need to be standing here again asking an urgent question on the plight of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. It was only in November last year that the shadow Foreign Secretary—my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry)—tabled an urgent question on the case of Ms Zaghari-Ratcliffe, yet sadly here we are once more.

This week's events only further highlight the pressing need for urgent action to end the arbitrary and illegal detention without due process of a British citizen who has been incarcerated in Tehran's Evin prison since April 2016. The Iranian judiciary has now brought a second false charge against Nazanin and has denied her access to a lawyer. However, even to this day, the Government have yet formally to call for her release. They have stated that they have raised the concerns of Nazanin's family with the Iranian Government, but have not formally called for her release. Is that not the

lowest possible expectation a British citizen can have of their Government, and should not the Minister call for her release today?

However, it is good to hear that for the first time since her arrest, Nazanin was allowed direct contact with the UK embassy in Tehran. What is the Minister's assessment of this development? Does he believe that it signals that the Iranian regime is finally starting to treat Nazanin as a British citizen? What action has the British embassy in Iran taken to ensure that Nazanin is able to access the legal support, including access to a lawyer, to which she is entitled during any further hearings?

The Foreign Secretary has repeatedly mentioned that he has spoken to his counterpart, Foreign Minister Zarif, about these issues, but he will know as much as anyone that Nazanin's fate ultimately lies with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. Will the Minister of State today explain what pressure has been placed on the IRGC to ensure Nazanin's release? Has the Foreign Secretary actually made any efforts to meet those elements in the regime who are really responsible for Nazanin's detention in order to call for her release?

Alistair Burt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his questions, but I am unable and unwilling to answer many of them—in the circumstances I outlined earlier, it would not be appropriate—and I know he would not press me to deal with the detail of the negotiations and their handling between us and the Iranian Government in such a sensitive case. I can well understand the reasons for the questions, which were all perfectly fair, as were those of the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), but their position is different from mine in terms of dealing with the answers.

Like everyone, I share the sense of regret that we still have to discuss this in the way we do—even though we are limited in how we can talk about it—but I can only repeat the assurances I gave a moment ago: at the highest levels here in the UK, with the Prime Minister's call to President Rouhani and the Foreign Secretary's intervention, and through our ambassador's interventions, we continue to call for access and the temporary furlough. We are doing all we can in our belief that this is the right way to handle this delicate situation. I do not think it would be appropriate or helpful, however, to deal with some of the hon. Gentleman's questions.

There is no indication yet of any change in the attitude of the Iranian authorities towards Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe's status, and we are having to work with what we have, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that no conversation goes by at any senior level in which these issues are not raised. Our consular team handle this very carefully, and representations will continue to be made, but as I indicated, to deal with every single part of this would not be the appropriate way to help Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe and her families.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): The shocking news reported last night that a judge in Iran has told the jailed British-Iranian teacher, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, that he expects her to be convicted on a new charge of "spreading propaganda against the regime" is truly appalling. As Amnesty International has stated, "this is yet another body blow for Nazanin",

who, we must remember, has denied all the charges brought against her. Can the Minister confirm that the future of Nazanin is not enmeshed in the long-standing British debt of more than £300 million and that this has been agreed by both Governments? Does he also agree that now is the time to issue a demarche, as Nazanin discussed with the UK ambassador, given the treatment she has so far received and does he further agree that she has already been subjected to a blatantly unfair trial and sentence? Finally, will he now agree to significantly escalate the UK Government's response to Nazanin's plight by asking for the Prime Minister's personal intervention so that this further injustice can be brought to an end swiftly? This has been going on for far too long.

Alistair Burt: Of course I agree with the hon. Gentleman's last remark about the time. First, as I indicated earlier, there is no link between the debt owed by the UK and the dual national cases. Secondly, it is not appropriate at this stage to deal with the detail of any particular type of contact between the embassy and the Iranian Government. On escalating the matter still further, the Prime Minister has already raised the matter, which is being handled at the highest level by the British Government.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): As a result of Nazanin's treatment in prison, Redress has written to many of us asking for the intervention of the UN special rapporteur on torture. What action will the UK Government take to protect Nazanin from any further torture and ill treatment and to ensure she receives an independent medical examination and any necessary treatment in compliance with international law? Does the Minister agree with Redress that the UN special rapporteur should intervene?

Alistair Burt: No.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answer to the urgent question. Does he not agree that the time has come to use all our diplomatic influence, and can he confirm what action we can take with our allies collectively to bring about an end to the brutal emotional and physical persecution—it is nothing short of that—of Mrs Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe?

Alistair Burt: As always, the hon. Gentleman speaks from the heart, and his point certainly needs to be considered in this case. The humanitarian circumstances have been made clear to the Iranian authorities. This is a woman separated from her child some time ago. As the House knows, I have met the daughter and family in Tehran, and I am well aware of the circumstances. We make the case on the humanitarian basis as much as we can to indicate the pathway forward, and the UK will continue to do so in a manner that the House would expect and understand.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): When we had a debate on this matter in Westminster Hall last July, I was not the only MP who said that many of their constituents were really exercised by the plight of this lady. I still get emails from constituents about it. Am I really in a position to assure them that the British Government are doing everything they can?

Alistair Burt: The short answer, as I said earlier to the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), is yes. It is difficult to explain to constituents who would like to believe that the answer to everything happening abroad lies here, but it does not. We will do everything we can, and are doing so, not only in this case but in the cases of other dual nationals. We will not know how successful that is until the happy day when she and others are released.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) for her tenacity on behalf of her constituent. Last November, I asked the Foreign Secretary whether he was willing to hold discussions with the Iranian authorities about their targeting of the BBC Persian service—not only journalists in the UK but their families in Iran. There are real fears for their safety. Can the Minister update the House?

Alistair Burt: Yes, I can assure the hon. Lady, whose own tenacity in other respects also deserves commendation, that the issues affecting the BBC Persian service have been raised directly both by the Foreign Secretary and me. We are conscious of the pressures under which they work and the diligence with which they go about their duties, and I can assure her that those matters are indeed raised.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Last year, I met Redress, which has been mentioned already, to discuss not just this case but that of Andy Tsege. It published a report in January saying that more than 100 British citizens a year were reporting being mistreated in jails abroad and not being provided with the humanitarian or consular assistance that the British Government should be giving them. It also says that there is inconsistency in the support provided, particularly for dual nationals. What can the Minister do to assure us that any British national, whether a dual national or not, will receive the same consular support if they find themselves in that position?

Alistair Burt: They are certainly offered all the same support, but the blunt fact is that not all states treat dual nationals the same: some recognise dual nationality and allow access to the UK authorities, others do not accept it and treat the dual national solely as a national of their own state. In those circumstances, they do not believe they are required to give access. I can assure the hon. Lady, however, that in each and every case the UK Government make exactly the same representations seeking access, because we believe that dual nationality means what it says: dual nationality, not sole nationality.¹

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Taking on board the lessons of the mistakes made in this case, will the Government review how they deal with such situations in the future to ensure that no other British citizen has to go through the misery that Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe and her family are experiencing at the moment?

Alistair Burt: I wish I could give the hon. Lady the assurance she seeks, but the decisions of foreign courts and states and their impact on UK nationals are not always within the power of the UK to resolve at the speed or in the way we would wish. I can assure her that,

1. [Official Report, 4 June 2018, Vol. 642, c. 1MC.]

[Alistair Burt]

as any contact between colleagues and our consular officials should make clear, although every case is individual, note is taken of how cases are handled in particular states so that if there are lessons to learn, they are learned. As I have said, we are sometimes dealing with situations that are not entirely within the United Kingdom's control, and each case may need to be handled with a different degree of dexterity. People are released from foreign detention every day, unknown to the House, unknown to the press, known only to their families and sometimes to us, so not everything is done publicly; but everything that the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and our consular service try to do is for the best in terms of their welfare.

Point of Order

1.50 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday a written ministerial statement entitled "Road Haulage Update" was published by the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), setting out plans for a solution to the problems of Operation Stack, and explaining how the Government intend to avoid queues 20 miles long should customs checks be introduced post-Brexit.

This is an issue of strategic national importance, which, if mishandled, will devastate not only Kent but the national economy. The Secretary of State did not make an oral statement yesterday, and has failed to give the House an opportunity to scrutinise the announcement. Can you advise me, Mr Speaker, on how the Secretary of State might be encouraged to come and make a formal statement to the House?

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his characteristic courtesy in giving me notice of his intention to raise this matter. The short answer to him, and for the benefit of the House, is that the decision on whether to make a written or an oral ministerial statement is a matter for the Minister; it cannot be decided by the Chair.

I recognise the importance of the issue to which the hon. Gentleman has referred, and it is evidence to me—and doubtless to others—that he is, to put it mildly, perturbed, or even irritated, by the absence of an oral statement. He asked what recourse he has in the circumstances. The answer is that the hon. Gentleman is a most dexterous individual in respect of the use of the Order Paper and the facilities of the Table Office, and he is not unaware of mechanisms by which he can secure further answers. If he thinks that the matter remains of urgent importance, he can seek to secure the presence of the Minister to respond to him.

I think we will leave it there for now, but meanwhile, the hon. Gentleman has ventilated his dissatisfaction.

Social Justice Commission

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

1.52 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the law relating to the Social Mobility Commission.

Social justice is the defining issue for our country, and I was delighted that the Prime Minister's key message in her "burning injustice" speech in July 2016 was that the Government would fight injustice in our society. The Social Mobility Commission, then led by Alan Milburn, was to play a crucial role in that mission: its purpose was to shine a light on progress towards tackling injustice. In December last year, however, Alan Milburn resigned, alongside his fellow commissioners. He explained his reasons in his letter of resignation, stating specifically that roles on the commission had been vacant for nearly two years, and expressing his belief that the Government were—in his words—

"unable to devote the necessary energy and focus to the social mobility agenda".

Social justice is one of our themes on the Education Committee. We want everyone in our society to be able to reach and climb the ladder of opportunity, and the resignation of the commissioners was naturally a source of serious concern. We held a public evidence session with Alan Milburn, Baroness Shephard and David Johnston, and published a report with our conclusions. We concluded that there should be a body inside Government to co-ordinate and drive forward initiatives to ensure social justice across the country, and to ensure coherence and cohesion across Departments. We also said that a few relatively minor legislative changes would result in a more effective commission, and it is those changes that the Bill seeks to implement.

By the time the commissioners walked out in December, there were only four of them left. The commission had started with 20, but there had been no renewals since March 2015. An appointment process at the beginning of 2016 was described as "farcical". The commission was left to dwindle, which seems totally at odds with the Prime Minister's commitment to social justice. Baroness Shephard was the deputy chair of the commission. She said that

"the writing was very firmly on the wall anyway. It had to be because we could not get answers. There were delays. Not delays, but blank walls as far as appointing new commissioners was concerned, and I thought there was no point...there was no point at all."

The Bill would create a minimum membership of the commission, of seven members in addition to the Chair. I see no reason why the Government should aim for the number of commissioners to be fewer than 10, although I recognise that there may be occasions on which the membership may, for one reason or another, fall below that number. However, introducing a minimum membership in law will mitigate the risk that such attrition and neglect will happen again.

The commission has conducted in-depth research, and has a focus on data and analysis. It is therefore in an ideal position to analyse Government policy objectively for its effect on social mobility. The Government already recognise the value of independent advisory bodies'

objectively assessing financial implications of policy: the Office for Budget Responsibility is one example. Why should that not apply to social justice as well? The Bill seeks to give the commission specific powers to publish social justice impact assessments of both policy and legislative proposals. Those assessments should be used to help Governments to improve policy, not just as a means by which negative effects are flagged.

The legislation that set up the commission provides that it must, on request, give advice to a Minister of the Crown on how to improve social mobility in England. However, Alan Milburn told us that the Government

"lacked the head space and the band width to match the rhetoric of healing social division with the reality".

He noted that

"there is only so long you can go on pushing water uphill".

We are not confident that Ministers regularly and usefully request advice from the commission. The Bill would give it power to give advice proactively to Ministers on how to improve social justice in England, as well as its duty to give advice on request.

Our final suggested legislative change is to the name of the commission. I do not like the phrase "social mobility". It reminds me of a Vodafone advertisement. While it can convey the idea of people moving up the ladder of opportunity, the phrase "social justice" goes much further. It describes helping the most disadvantaged to reach that ladder of opportunity, and supporting them should they fall. Changing the name of the commission would make abundantly clear what it is seeking to improve. It is the Ronseal principle: it does what it says on the tin—not just improving the chances of some people, but offering all people equal access to opportunities. As its name has already changed twice since 2010, a further small change would be consistent with its changing role.

I am delighted that our report was agreed unanimously and that the draft Bill has the full support of the Education Committee. I pay tribute to all my colleagues on the Committee for their hard work and support, and for their commitment to social justice. We may be members of different parties, but we are united in addressing social justice in education. I thank the officers of the Committee as well.

We are convinced that the relatively modest changes proposed in the Bill, in addition to a body inside Government to implement recommendations and co-ordinate across Departments, will result in a more effective social justice commission. We want to see the commission empowered to monitor and report effectively on progress towards achieving social justice in England. We want the Government to hear the commission loud and clear when it suggests remedies, and when it advocates on behalf of those in our society who need a voice the most. An effective social justice commission working in tandem with an implementation body at the heart of Government could really begin to heal some of the great social divides in our country. I hope that Members on both sides of the House will support the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Robert Halfon, Lucy Allan, Marion Fellows, James Frith, Emma Hardy, Trudy Harrison, Ian Mearns, Thelma Walker, Lucy Powell and Mr William Wragg present the Bill.

[Robert Halfon]

Robert Halfon accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 June and to be printed (Bill 213).

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed with the main business of the day, I remind the House that we will interrupt the debate at 2.30 pm, or possibly a few seconds before, to hold a one-minute silence to remember the terror attack in Manchester on 22 May 2017.

Serious Violence Strategy

2.1 pm

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Serious Violence Strategy.

A year ago today, 22 innocent people, including many children, lost their lives in an appalling and cowardly attack on the Manchester Arena. Today, we remember their lives and share a thought for all the families who were affected on that tragic day.

We are reminded today of the devastating consequences that hatred and violence can have for ordinary lives. This Government's absolute priority is the safety and security of their citizens. No one should feel unsafe on our streets and in our communities. That is why I am here today to talk about another issue affecting the lives of ordinary citizens and to lay out the Government's strategy for tackling violent crime.

This Government are determined to end the deadly cycle of violence we see on our streets today. We are clear that these crimes are unacceptable, that there is no place in society for these horrendous crimes and that anyone committing these acts of violence must feel the full force of the law.

The recent increase in serious violence is of deep concern to us all in both Houses, and I assure Members that the Government take this very seriously. That is why on 9 April we published our "Serious violence strategy", which sets out the action we are taking to address serious violence and in particular the recent increase in knife crime, gun crime and homicide.

The Government have also made a commitment to bring forward legislation in the coming weeks. Our strategy represents a step change in the way we think about and respond to serious violence, establishing a new balance between prevention and the rigorous law enforcement activity that is already happening up and down the country.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Minister will know that recorded incidents of violent crime have risen from 700,000 in 2009 to over 1.3 million in 2018. Does he think in any way, shape or form that the 20,000-plus reduction in the number of police officers in that time has any connection to that rise in crime?

Mr Wallace: I hear the right hon. Gentleman's observation. What I do know is that, during the last spike in knife crime, in 2009-10, there were more knife crime offences than there are now and police numbers were at much higher levels, so it is not entirely connected, as he will know. If it were, his logic would have said that there would have been fewer knife crime incidents, when the police numbers were much higher, than there are today. Perhaps he can answer this question: in 2009-10, why was there a spike in knife crime given that there were such high police numbers then?

David Hanson: The figures are clear: there were 700,000 violent incidents in 2009 and 1.3 million now. I was the Minister dealing with knife crime then and there was a spike. We put investment into early prevention, after-school activities, higher policing visibility at the school gates, visibility at night and alternative activities for people in

the streets and we reduced knife crime incidents; they were recorded at hospitals and at accident and emergency. In his violent crime strategy, the Minister is now reinventing those measures, having cut them in 2010.

Mr Wallace: I note the right hon. Gentleman's examples, but none of them—hospitals, local schools, local government—was about police numbers; they were about similar things to the things we are talking about today in the strategy and the broader response by society to tackling why violence is being embedded in communities. So it is not purely about the police numbers debate.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I reject utterly that connection. We would have to swamp the streets with policemen; there would have to be policemen available at every violent incident for it to make that form of difference. We would be back to Cromwell saying, "If I arm one in 10 will that be enough?" Of much more significance in terms of the propensity to violence is the lack of attention to the question of young people—particularly very young people—and parenting. That is where the Government's efforts must be directed.

Mr Wallace: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's point. It is certainly the case with any type of crime, whether violent crime, serious crime, organised crime or terrorism, that it has to be dealt with not purely by arresting our way out of the problem.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Wallace: I am going to press on.

We can debate police numbers all we like in the House, but the simple fact of the matter is that, unless we get involved in prevention and share the burden more broadly in society—*[Interruption.]* As important, because it often slips the mind of the Opposition, is the fact that if we do not live within our means we will not be able to sustain the spending on our communities and public sector. I regularly have to remind the Opposition that in 2010 the deficit in this country was £150 billion. We were spending more than we got in tax receipts. Unless we start to live within our means we cannot sustain the investment in our communities. We can live with the Opposition's fantasy politics of nationalising everything on a Monday, funding everything on a Tuesday and borrowing all year round, but we will pay for that in the end. That is why we have set about balancing the economy and taking a strong and stable determination in how we invest in our policemen.

Our approach is not solely focused on law enforcement, important though that is, but depends also on a range of partnerships across many sectors such as education, health, social services, housing, youth services and victim services. It requires a multiple-strand approach, involving a range of partners across different sectors, such as those framed in our four pillars: early intervention and prevention; tackling county lines and misuse of drugs; supporting communities and partnerships; and an effective law enforcement and criminal justice response.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): I am encouraged by what the Minister says about partnership models. Can he set out some localised examples of best practice at work, so we can get away from this artificial debate

around police numbers and look at what actually works on the ground and how to put these solutions into practice?

Mr Wallace: Here is a good example. I visited Merseyside recently to see the work it has done on organised crime groups and county lines. A particularly nasty organised crime group was operating from one part of Merseyside and sending people up into Lancashire; a 15-year-old was sent into Lancashire to deal drugs in the Rossendale valley.

We decided to take action against that organised crime group. The local police, alongside some first-rate leadership from Merseyside council and officials in the council, set about dismantling that group. They dismantled, effectively, the café where it met; they co-ordinated with Lancashire police so they could deal with the 15-year-old who was in Rossendale; through the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 they targeted the huge amounts of cash being used by that organised crime group; and they dismantled the whole group. We used the local authorities in both Merseyside and Lancashire and both police forces, and we used imaginative methods and the powers that POCA and other legislation have given these people to make sure we took apart the money that enabled them to operate. That crime group is no longer active, and that community has taken back control and managed to deliver a successful response.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): The Minister knows that there are difficulties in London at the moment. He is also aware that Cressida Dick has requested additional resources to deal with them. I came here today in the hope that we would have a fair and balanced debate about what we need on our streets, rather than this Punch and Judy nonsense. What he has suggested is that it is okay for nine children to have died in my local authority area because we do not have the money for the police force. May I ask him to be a bit more sensitive in the way he is dealing with this debate?

Mr Wallace: Is the hon. Lady suggesting that I said it was okay for nine people in her constituency to die? That is the worst example of Punch and Judy and immature politics I have heard in this House for a very long time. It is fine for her to ask about resources, and it is fine for her to say that she does not think the response is correct, but she seems to suggest that a Government Minister is saying it is okay for nine people to die. Is that the measure of the debate we are going to have today from the Opposition? She insults the police, the local authority and her own constituents. The reality is that people are dying on the streets because of a whole range of issues. Tragically, people were dying on the streets long before the Tory Government or the Labour Government were here. I remember patrolling the streets where people had died, and people were not going round half the time saying that it was purely the Government's fault. There are lots of factors involved.

One of the factors behind the rise in violent crime is the use of smartphones and encryption, where we have seen a big shift. Those networks empower people to trade drugs and to communicate in a safe space. They allow connections between groups in a way that never happened before and that makes those groups much less vulnerable to the work of the law enforcement agencies.

[Mr Wallace]

In the old days, if anyone wanted to import huge amounts of cocaine to this country, somebody had to go to Colombia and meet people there. They had to physically go there and order the drugs. Then they had to take the cash and launder it. In the space of about eight years, these changes have meant that no one has to do that anymore. People can sit at home and order and deal drugs, and they can launder the money almost instantaneously through Bitcoin and elsewhere. That is a real challenge for the police, and it will not be fixed purely by putting more patrols into communities. It is also about changing how policing is done and investing in upstream National Crime Agency issues—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) is right to say that there are issues of resource, and that is why we have increased some of the resource. I am informed that £49 million more is going into the Met, and the violent crime strategy comes with some new money.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I really want us to get back to a serious tone. I am grateful to the Minister for specifically mentioning the cocaine market. Will he say something about our Border Force? Will he also say something about resources for the National Crime Agency? He will understand that the average black teenager in Tottenham barely knows where Colombia is and certainly does not have the means to organise trans-shipment routes. Will he also say something about eastern European gangs?

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Gentleman makes a clear point. In the past, there were plenty of middlemen between the local gangs and the big serious organised criminals running out of Colombia or the Balkans. That has now reduced. Through safe and secure encryption, young people have the ability to order drugs and gangs have the ability to have delivered to their door large packets of drugs from Albanian or Serbian drug gangs, or indeed from local drug gangs: United Kingdom citizens—it is not the copyright of the western Balkans. That has put real power into the system.

At the same time, the United Kingdom is fast becoming the biggest consumer of cocaine in Europe. There is high demand from the consumer, and cocaine is no longer the preserve of the yuppie or the rich. We are seeing cocaine in my villages, in rural communities and in communities in London that would not previously have used it. It is a high-margin, high-supply drug at the moment, and that is fuelling the increase in violence.

With those Albanians or those serious organised criminals comes the enforcement of the county lines. They do not just put a 15-year-old into a house or “cuckoo” the house; they provide a weapon to enforce the drug line. Sometimes, if the 15-year-old is not a willing participant, the gangs will ruthlessly enforce that county line with violence. They will kill those people and they will kill the local drug dealers if they get in their way.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and I, through the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime, recently met some girls who had been involved in county lines. They had become involved because of

boyfriends, because of money and because it was a solution to the problems they faced in their lives. They said that nobody had ever told them not to do it. No one at school or earlier on in their lives had explained that these things might be offered to them and that there were choices to be made. There was no one in their school telling them about that. Does the Minister agree that schools have a duty to keep our children safe, and that they need more resources to ensure that children know what good choices to make?

Mr Wallace: I totally agree that we have to educate children about the dangers that they are exposed to.

I go back to the point about modern communications and smartphones. In the past there was often a gulf between streetwise communities where young people grew up exposed to crime and were sometimes exploited by it, and other areas where people would say, “I never see gun crime in my village”. In the past, there was no connection between the two, but now it is all joined up. Now, young people can be exploited wherever they are, and whatever their background, by being able to access drugs using their smartphones. That is why we are seeing this problem seeping in, and that is why the first place to go is the schools—as low as the primary schools—to teach children about how vulnerable they can be online and how vulnerable they can be to being approached.

Another part of my portfolio involves child sexual exploitation. People are being exploited, manipulated and organised through those telephones. That is a real challenge, and I am not going to pretend that we have a solution.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): I take the Minister’s point about this impacting on young people of all backgrounds, but there is no doubt that there is a clear link between what is going on and deprivation, inequality and poverty. Does he agree that if this issue were affecting a different group—a privileged, more wealthy group of young people—it would be headline news every day of the week? Surely this is why we must think about how we approach our young people, and why we must adopt what many are describing as a public health approach to this issue. We are not looking after the mental health and wellbeing of too many of our young people living in deprived communities, including some of the wards in my constituency.

Mr Wallace: I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman, who I know is on the violent crime taskforce. I often find that the crimes in my communities do not get reported. As a north-west MP, I sometimes feel that when crimes happen in London they get a higher profile than they would in Lancashire. We have a duty to point out to all our young people where they are vulnerable. I agree that some communities do not get the attention they deserve. Certainly, some of the crime we have seen in London has too quickly been put down to gang crime, rather than to serious organised crime. It is often serious organised crime groups that are exploiting these young people, but because this crime is put down to gang crime, there is a tendency to say, “Well, we have dealt with gangs like that for many years.” Those young people are just as vulnerable and exploited as any other type of child.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Five young men have been stabbed in my constituency in the past month alone. The community is traumatised, and people are worried that things are going to get worse, as they always do, as the long summer nights roll in. I know that lots of London Members here will be wondering what can be done in the immediate term, in addition to the strategy, in terms of extra funding for prevention and diversionary programmes to ensure that we do not have a summer of escalating violence in our capital.

Mr Wallace: I understand the fear about the challenges on summer nights. If five people had been killed in my communities, I would feel as horrified as the hon. Gentleman.

First, we are building on the things that have been happening for years. We are getting everyone around the table—the Mayor of London is on the serious violence taskforce—because it is about engaging everyone. I am not deaf to the resource issue, and I do not pretend that the police have not been under stress. We can disagree about why they have not had more money. We also have to recognise that policing has to change as crime changes. We have seen them do some good stuff. We have sometimes seen money spent in the wrong place. We have to work on making sure money is spent in the right places.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): So-called drill music often glamorises violence, stabbings and even murder. When allied with social media, drill music can amplify tensions between gangs and groups. How can we call the social media platforms to account and encourage them to wake up to their responsibilities?

Mr Wallace: I welcome the statement over the weekend from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on consulting on measures to remove both illegal and legal harms from the internet, and on the exposure of people, certainly young people, to those harms on the internet. I would welcome any suggestions from either side of the House, and the Home Office, alongside DCMS, will tackle those harms.

I met Google this morning to discuss how it can do more to take down violence-inspiring videos. The level of violence to which my young children are exposed quite early in the day on television, let alone the internet, will come back to haunt us.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): In his answer to the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), the Minister said that he was not blind to the idea of resources, particularly in relation to London and the real crisis that is happening in our city. Will he give us a little more hope because, like the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich and many London Members here, I worry about the trend continuing into the summer months?

Mr Wallace: In the Home Office we are always open to listening to more demands. After Manchester last year I, as Security Minister, received a demand from Mark Rowley and the head of MI5, and we worked hard at the Treasury to get £50 million of extra money to respond to the operational pressures.

It is not just London. Merseyside MPs saw a spate of murders and gun crime at the start of last year. There is a real pressure that we have to try to address. Of course the Home Office will work with colleagues to see where we can get more out of the resources we have.

We have found more resources. We have put £49 million into the strategy, and we have put more money into some of the broader responses, including local government and community responses. We will work with the Mayor of London, with whom we will discuss what his priorities may or may not be, on which we may or may not agree.

I wish I had more money. We did not come into Government to cut things. There is sometimes a suggestion that we had a choice and we chose not to spend money. We will try to do our best to meet the resources, but burden share is important, and it is the same in other growing areas of crime. We cannot arrest our way out of some of these things. We have to burden share, and we are doing a whole range of things. A new contest will be launched in the next few weeks and, in order to meet the growing scale of the threat, we have to burden share with both the private sector and the public sector on keeping us safe on the ground. That is the scale we face not just here but internationally.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wallace: I will give way, and then I will have to make some progress.

John Cryer: The Minister is right to say it is not just about the police, because it is also about the other agencies. The problem is that every agency across the board has faced cuts, certainly in London. My east London constituency covers two boroughs. Waltham Forest has faced cuts of around £100 million, and Redbridge has faced similar cuts. The boroughs cannot mount early intervention and provide greater resources through schools and social services while, at the same time, carrying the burden of £100 million in cuts over seven or eight years.

Mr Wallace: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. As I have said throughout, where we can find more resource to meet this pressure, we will. We might disagree on the wider economy issue but, nevertheless, we are trying to balance the books. Without doubt, it is important that we have this framework in place, with £49 million of early investment, as well as other sums, to make sure that we start the process of gelling together all the people who can help to deliver on some of these issues.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wallace: No, I really have to press on. I have given way quite a lot. I am about to read my speech backwards, and Members will not want to hear it twice.

As I have said, it is vital that we steer young people away from crime in the first place. We have to support positive alternatives and timely interventions to provide them with the skills and resilience to lead productive lives free from violence. In the strategy we propose a range of universal targeted interventions, including the

[Mr Wallace]

early intervention youth fund, which will be launched this summer and to which police and crime commissioners can apply to support early intervention and prevention activity with young people. We will also provide support to Redthread to expand the pilot and its youth violence intervention programme outside London and to develop its services in London hospitals.

We have reviewed the evidence, and the strategy sets out the trends and drivers of serious violence. The analysis makes it clear that the rise in serious violence is due to a range of factors, but the changes in the drug market are a key driver of recent increases in knife crime, gun crime and homicides, which marks the second element of the strategy.

Crack cocaine markets have strong links to serious violence, and evidence suggests that crack use is rising in England and Wales due to a mix of supply and demand factors. County lines drug dealing is also associated with violence and exploitation, and its spread is also a key factor.

In addition, it is thought that drugs market violence may be facilitated and spread by the social media I talked about earlier. The strategy sets out a range of activity we will undertake to tackle serious violence, including more than 60 specific commitments on action. We are providing £40 million over two years to support the initiatives in the serious violence strategy, including £11 million for the early intervention youth fund and £3.6 million for a new national county lines co-ordination centre that will sit in the National Crime Agency.

We are particularly concerned about county lines because of the violence they are now developing. The links behind the county lines are complicated, and the threat crosses police and local authority boundaries, which is why the national county lines co-ordination centre will be key not only in sharing intelligence but in co-ordinating responses and in making sure that victims are supported or diverted away from the county lines.

We will also work with the Department for Education on the support and advice offered to children who are educated in alternative provision, including those who have been excluded, to reduce their risk of being drawn into crime or on to the pathways into crime. In addition, we will work with the Department for Education and Ofsted to explore what more can be done to support schools in England in responding to potential crime.

However, taking effective action means that the issue needs to be understood and owned locally as much as nationally. Communities and relevant partners must also see tackling serious violence as their problem, which is the third pillar of our approach. We are supporting communities to build local resilience and awareness by continuing to match fund local area reviews, which identify the resilience and capability of local areas to respond to gang-related threats, including county lines. That follows on from our support to help partners.

Police and crime commissioners have a vital role in working with community safety partnerships, or the local equivalent, in providing local leadership to bring communities together. That is why the Government are also committing £1 million to our community fund for each of the next two years. The fund, which was launched last week, provides support for local initiatives that

work with young people to tackle knife crime. Those initiatives include early intervention and education, as well as mentoring and outreach work. In March we launched a major new media advertising campaign, #knifefree, aimed at young people and young adults to raise awareness of the risks of carrying knives. That was chiefly delivered through social media targeted at young people and it has had a positive response from our partners. We must pursue, disrupt and prosecute those who commit violent crimes, and a robust response from law enforcement therefore remains critical. As I have said, we will bring forward legislation to strengthen our response to violent crime. That includes the introduction of new measures such as—

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: Order. Colleagues, we will now hold a one-minute silence to remember all those affected by the terror attack in Manchester a year ago today.

The House observed a one-minute silence.

Mr Wallace: A year ago, I was in Manchester, from very early in the morning of the attack, and I wish to take this opportunity to place on the record my appreciation of Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Manchester, of the leader of the council and of chief constable Ian Hopkins for the fantastic and amazing work they have done over the past 12 months in helping to heal Manchester and bring that community together. Having visited the investigation on many occasions, I cannot say just how much regard I have for the police and intelligence services, who are still pursuing leads and still working to keep people safe. I believe we have the best police and intelligence services in the world, which is why Manchester is back on its feet, alongside a great community who are determined to make sure that the spirit of Manchester lives on. Although I am not there with them today, many of us are there in spirit and we stand ready to continue to help that great city.

We must pursue, disrupt and prosecute those who commit violent crimes, and a robust response from law enforcement therefore remains critical. As I have said, we will introduce legislation to strengthen our response to violent crime. That will include the introduction of new measures such as restrictions on buying and carrying knives and corrosive substances; and banning certain firearms. An offensive weapons Bill will be introduced into the Commons or the Lords in the next few weeks. We will also continue to support and facilitate police action such as Operation Sceptre—weeks of action designed to tackle knife crime—and action to prevent violent gang material on social media. The serious violence taskforce has been established to drive the implementation of the strategy and support the delivery of key objectives. The taskforce brings together Ministers, Members of Parliament, the Mayor of London, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, the director general of the National Crime Agency, other senior police leaders, and public sector and voluntary sector chief executives.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): The Minister mentioned social media. The Met police have reported more than 400 incitement to violence videos on YouTube alone that are still online today. Do the Government support police authorities across the

country having the power to compel YouTube and other social media outlets to remove content that is violent or incites people to violence?

Mr Wallace: I absolutely support our forcing these outlets to take this material down where we can. I met Google and YouTube this morning to discuss exactly that subject. The challenge around the world on videos and YouTube stuff is not on cases where a clear crime is involved, such as bomb-making manuals or child abuse; it is where companies—often based abroad—decide that our version of incitement or extremism is not their version of it. That is where we have to look at all alternatives. That is what the announcement at the weekend on the consultation by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport was about. We have to have a proper collective discussion and ask, “Where do we start and stop? How do we draw a line about what is freedom of speech, what is incitement and what is violent extremism?” That is not as straightforward as people say. However, 98% of violent extremism on those internet platforms is being taken down within 24 hours and some of it is being taken down within two hours. We are pushing for this to happen even quicker, through using artificial intelligence and machine learning to recognise those issues. We want these companies to put more of their resources into that, to make sure these things are taken down. I also want them to report this content when they take it down so that our police and agencies can do something about it.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Minister makes the point that it is difficult to tell, but we do not have a problem deciding whether something is incitement to violence offline. I fail to see why we cannot apply that logic to online content and why he cannot work with the internet providers and the platforms to administer online what we have offline.

Mr Wallace: When we see these things and we report them, these providers take them down. We are asking them to spot them in advance before they are uploaded. That is what we want. On the plus side, when, through the Met police’s internet referral unit, we report these things, the providers do take them down. The simple scale of the internet means that we want them to do this before or during the uploading. They have made some progress on this matter, although we still think they can do more. I am acutely aware that they have made more effort only when we have talked about regulation, tax and harder things; it is not as though they jumped through the front door offering. However, I think they have had a realisation, through seeing the patience that is being tested internationally.

I was at the G7 recently with people from France and Germany, and they were all saying to the lead four companies, “We have sort of had enough.” Those companies are now starting to move and move rapidly. We have supported the Global Internet Forum, set up and chaired at the moment by both Governments and the big four. We have to make sure that they do more about the small providers, because as they are taking more stuff down, small providers and platforms, based in jurisdictions we cannot get at, are popping up and handling most of that content. We have to do more on that. We have to put more pressure on the United States about some of the far right websites. As the Select

Committee on Home Affairs rightly pointed out, we will proscribe National Action yet it will still be running a website—or it has in the past—in the US. However, we are working hard with the Americans and they have said they will do more, as will the internet companies. They are now moving, although they could have moved a bit faster—that is how I would probably say it.

Gareth Thomas: Nigh on three weeks ago, two teenagers in my constituency were shot at and seriously injured. I do not doubt the commitment of Cressida Dick and the Metropolitan police to finding the perpetrators of that shocking incident, but my constituents and I worry about the decline in the visibility of the police presence on our streets in Harrow. I therefore take this opportunity to underline to the Minister the profound concern, particularly from London MPs, across party, as well as from others, about the lack of sufficient resources for the Metropolitan police. I urge him to do whatever he can to lobby the Chancellor for further funding for the Met.

Mr Wallace: I hear the hon. Gentleman’s point on the funding. I also say that it is important to work with Cressida Dick and to ask about policing priorities and how she chooses to deploy her force. All police forces do things differently. Members may recall significant gun violence in Nottingham a few years ago, when the city went through a patch that included the murder of a jeweller’s wife. Interestingly, Nottingham got a bad reputation in the early-90s or mid-90s, but that was driven by two people and when they were taken out it had a profound effect on that community. There are definitely operational decisions here as to how police forces spend their resources, but I also hear the point about resources.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Wallace: I really have to move on. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State will respond to the debate and can certainly answer more questions on those points.

I believe that the approach set out in the strategy—a multi-strand approach with a greater emphasis on early intervention—will address the increase in serious violence and help young people to develop the skills and resilience to live happy and productive lives away from violence, and it will also ensure that people feel safe in their communities and homes.

2.40 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): We Opposition Members also want to honour the anniversary of the Manchester atrocity. We share the Minister’s appreciation for the leadership of Mayor Andy Burnham, and for the work of the police, security services, fire services, NHS and other public sector actors. Above all, we want to honour the people of Manchester, who did not allow the bombing to tear them apart and who showed outstanding love, solidarity and strength.

I am pleased that the House has this opportunity to debate the important serious violence strategy. Serious violence is an issue that concerns people all over the country. Here in London alone, bloodstained month has succeeded bloodstained month since the new year.

[Ms Diane Abbott]

Just in the past few days we saw in Islington the 67th homicide victim in London this year, who was also the 42nd victim of a fatal stabbing. But it is not just a big-city issue. The county lines phenomenon has brought violent gang-related crime into the heart of the countryside and county towns.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way and for what she is saying in her speech. She talks about serious violence not being just a London issue; it might not be very well known but throughout Norfolk and Norwich we have seen the biggest surge in violent crime in the entire country in the past couple of years. There has been a fifteenfold increase in knife crime and a 70% increase in gun crime. In the midst of this perfect storm and this rising tide of despair and woe is increasing youth homelessness, more children in care, more children permanently excluded from school and community policing completely and utterly cut—Norfolk was the first county police force in the country to do that. Some £30 million has been cut from the police budget in Norfolk—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. If you want to speak, I can put you on the list. Short interventions, please; it will help the House.

Ms Abbott: Serious violence is not just a big-city phenomenon. Earlier, after some of my hon. Friends' interventions, the hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) said that this was artificial politics. Let me say to the House that nothing could be more real than mothers crying over their dead sons, and nothing could be more real than keeping our constituents safe. This is not a parliamentary game; this is about our constituents' lives.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is not just about the £253 million that is going to be cut from the Metropolitan police in the next 18 months? The cuts to youth services since 2010 have also fuelled this despair and worry.

Ms Abbott: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend and shall return to those issues later in my speech.

We welcome the broad themes in the serious violence strategy—tackling county lines; early intervention and prevention; supporting communities and local partnership; and law enforcement and the criminal justice response—but I hope the Minister will agree that it is reasonable to talk about resources when we discuss those themes. For some time, Ministers claimed that they were protecting the police budget and that crime was going down. I am glad to hear them now admit that there is a major problem with serious violence, the crime about which people are most frightened and concerned.

In the latest 12 months, police recorded gun crime is up 11% and knife crime is up 22%. There are widespread reports of serious violent crime, including knife crime, throughout the country. Reported deaths have risen sharply from the beginning of this year. Ministers have said that the Home Office serious violence strategy is designed to address all that. In her foreword to the

report, the then Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), said that £40 million of public funds have been committed to the strategy and that it is a

“significant programme of work involving a range of Government Departments and partners, in the public, voluntary and private sectors.”

Are Ministers really telling us that the resources that they are promising are adequate? To be clear, in the past 12 months the police recorded almost 40,000 knife crime offences and well over 6,000 firearms offences; the funding allocated to discourage, prevent, divert and detect serious weapons-related violent crimes is therefore just a few hundred pounds for each offence.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making an important point about resources, and it is clear that there are not enough. As she rightly says, it is about not just big cities but towns, too, and it is also about having the resources to detect and prevent crime and to get the intelligence. That is one of the biggest problems. It is about not only having police officers on the streets but being able to prevent crime in the first place.

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend is right. We talk about the lack of resources because the role of the police is not just to detect crime and prosecute; the role of the police is to be in communities and to know what is going on, and to be trusted stakeholders with whom community groups, parents, schools and others can work. If we do not have the police officers on the ground, that affects our ability to respond to serious violence, in more than one way. It is unclear from the Government's published strategy whether there is any new money at all or if it has just been stripped from the existing police budget, which has already been cut in real terms since 2010.

When we look at stakeholders' response to the strategy, we see their scepticism about the level of resources. The chair of the Local Government Association's Safer and Stronger Communities Board said:

“Only with the right funding and powers can councils continue to make a difference to people's lives by supporting families and young people and help tackle serious violent crime”.

The Association of Directors of Children's Services said:

“The strategy emphasises the importance of local communities and partnerships yet provides little for local authorities to develop local responses”.

If Ministers are to be taken seriously on this issue, they have to listen to what stakeholders say about resources.

Chuka Umunna: I completely agree with the shadow Home Secretary on this resourcing issue. First, does she agree that no one on the Opposition Benches is saying that resources alone or more police numbers alone are going to solve this? The point is, though, that the current state of affairs makes it so much harder to address this problem. Secondly, on prevention, does she agree that it is high time that this country elevated the status of our youth workers? Too often, youth work is treated as a useful add-on or a voluntary activity, but we need to treat youth work in the same way as we treat teaching. Youth workers sometimes spend more time with our young people than teachers in our society.

Ms Abbott: I agree with my hon. Friend. Nobody on the Opposition Benches is saying that having more police officers would solve the issue of serious violence on its own, but the Government cannot expect the community to believe that they are taking the issue seriously unless they provide the right level of police officers. The Government have long been in denial about the effect of their own cuts to the police. They have cut 21,000 police officers since 2010, and more than a quarter of police community support officers have been axed. They have not protected police budgets, which have fallen in real terms. According to the National Audit Office, which I hope Ministers will regard as a reliable source, central Government funding to police forces reduced by 25% in real terms between 2010-11 and 2015-16.

The Government talk about making more money available, but much of what they are talking about is the capacity of police and crime commissioners to raise the precept. Why should keeping people safe come out of the pockets of the community? When will the Government acknowledge that people expect national funding to meet national need?

While the Government have been in denial about the fact that they have not protected police funding, chief constables are clear that those cuts have consequences, especially for the police's ability to tackle serious violent crime and other important areas of crime. The most senior police officer in the country, Cressida Dick at the Metropolitan police, has said this about the effects of cuts:

"There's a whole load of things, but of course I would be naive to say that the reduction in police finances over the last few years, not just in London but beyond, hasn't had an impact."

It is time that Ministers started listening to chief constables and listening to stakeholders such as Cressida Dick.

Cressida Dick accepts that many reasons contribute to the rise in serious violent crime, but she also accepts that police cuts are one of them. Even the Home Office itself, in a leaked memorandum, accepted that resources are part of the problem. The Home Office document, "Serious violence; latest evidence on the drivers" said:

"So resources dedicated to serious violence have come under pressure and charge rates have dropped. This may have encouraged offenders."

It is unlikely to be

"the factor that triggered the shift in serious violence, but may be an underlying driver that has allowed the rise to continue."

Neil Coyle: On the issue of the lack of charging and prosecuting, what message does my right hon. Friend think that the Government are sending to Mariama Kamara whose 16-year-old son was murdered in September 2015 in Walworth, or to the mother of Rhyheim Barton who was shot and killed in my constituency on 5 May? Those mothers see the plateauing of prosecutions and know that there are people out there who are literally getting away with violent crime and murder.

Ms Abbott: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. If the level of charging has plateaued and people are literally getting away with murder, communities must think that, for all their protestations, Ministers do not really care. *[Interruption.]* Well, Ministers may try to reject that analysis, but the thoughts of the people in our communities must turn to that.

We want a serious violence strategy, not just increased levels of stop and search. Evidence-based stop-and-search has a role, but any serious strategy to tackle violent crime will involve a number of Departments and local stakeholders, as the Minister has said. We need to learn from what works. The Home Office's own research into stop-and-search shows that there is

"no statistically significant crime-reducing effect from the large increase in weapons searches during the course of Operation Blunt 2. This suggests that the greater use of weapons searches was not effective at the borough level for reducing crime."

Research from the College of Policing came to exactly the same conclusion. When the New York Mayor, Bill de Blasio, completely ended stop-and-frisk, he found that it coincided with a decline in crime. The Prime Minister, when she was Home Secretary, had this to say:

"I strongly believe that stop and search should be used proportionately, without prejudice, and with the support of local communities"

I agree with her comments then, even if her views and those of other Conservative Members differ now. Indiscriminate or mass stop-and-search has no discernible impact on reducing crime. Only targeted, intelligence-led stop-and-search has shown to be effective.

Ministers will be aware of the advances in tackling knife crime and other violent crime in Scotland. In 2017, there were no deaths from knife crime in Scotland, even though Glasgow was once thought to be the knife crime capital of this country. The approach taken there, which itself developed from lessons learned in the United States and elsewhere, was to treat knife crime as a public health issue. That means tackling the gangs and the gang culture, including diverting people from crime and helping young people get out of gangs. It includes work in communities and in schools, and ending the widespread use of school exclusion, rather than class exclusion.

Catherine West: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, although we have good and outstanding schools in many local authority areas, including in my own, sadly, the numbers of exclusions are going up, which seems to correlate with the rise in youth crime? That seems to hold up the evidence on the public health approach, as keeping young people in schools, or in some sort of care, seems to be an effective anti-crime approach.

Ms Abbott: We must reflect on the rising level of school exclusions and acknowledge that pupil referral units sometimes look and feel like academies for crime, even though the people who run them work very hard and do their very best.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): As someone who was a councillor in Glasgow when the initiative was introduced, I can say that it made an absolutely huge difference. I do not know whether she heard of the call-ins that we had in the medics against violence programme when gang members were brought into the courts and shown testimonies by parents and by medics. Did she see that and does she think that an initiative, whereby people could see the direct result of gang violence to families and communities, would make a difference in London?

Ms Abbott: I have heard of that initiative, and it is certainly worth trying. Dealing with violent crime is not just a question of policing and arresting. The initiatives

[Ms Abbott]

used in Glasgow are well worth looking at. Anybody who thinks that we can simply arrest or stop-and-search our way out of this crisis is deluding themselves.

A senior commander at the Met told me recently that an entire gang operating in one part of London was put away for lengthy sentences for drug crime. The result was not that the level of drug crime and the level of violence dropped, but that violent crime in the area actually surged, as competing gangs moved into the vacant territory. We need an integrated, joined-up approach. Seizures, arrests and sentencing will all play a part, but we also need the right level of resources, and those can only ever be a part of a much broader strategy involving schools, hospitals, local communities, social workers, resources for youth centres and recreation and much more. Of course, all those things have been cut as a result of this Government's austerity, and we are now living with the consequences. We cannot keep people, and our young people, safe on the cheap.

I try to visit the families of every young person who is stabbed or a victim of homicide in my constituency. I remember visiting a family recently. They were broken, and the mother could not stop crying. In my closing remarks, I want to say to the House as a whole that we need to remember that, whatever the circumstances, violent crime is a tragedy for the protagonist, a tragedy for the family, and traumatising for entire communities. That is why the Opposition believe that the Government must give the issue their continued attention and the right level of resources. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), the Minister said that if five people in his constituency died, he, too, would be very upset. Communities want Ministers to behave as though five people in their constituencies had died. Our constituents want the Government to pay more than lip service to the issue and to learn from strategies that have succeeded, whether in America or in Glasgow.

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Lady can question our policies or our funding, but to question our motives or suggest that we do not care is just insulting. Glasgow has done a fantastic job in reducing knife crime to zero—[*Interruption.*] Police Scotland has done that; it is a devolved matter. According to Police Scotland, the number of police in Glasgow in 2015 was 5,544. In 2017, when knife crime had been reduced to zero, the number was 5,530. Therefore, on the numbers, police in Glasgow managed a reduction, but they used broader shoulders to solve the crimes and the problem, and they should be rewarded for that. If there is an example to show that it is not all about police numbers, that is it.

Ms Abbott: I said earlier that I am not arguing that this is all about police numbers, and I touched on some of the other issues, such as education, youth services and community services, that are also part of the answer.

I have always believed that part of my role in this Parliament is to be a voice for the people who would not otherwise have one. In my community and in others that I have visited, there is serious concern about how much the Government are prepared to do about this issue. We want Ministers to act as though they believe that every young person's life has a value. We want

Ministers not just to talk the talk, but to put resources, police officers and support into strategies that can relieve our communities of the burden of constant reports of death and killing.

3.2 pm

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): It might be useful for me to begin with the genesis of the debate. I draw attention to it not merely to emphasise my role, but to illustrate that the request for this debate sprang not from one part of the House, but from across the House. When I raised the matter at business questions on 19 April, I was quickly followed by several colleagues, including the hon. Members for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer), for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and others, who were determined to ensure that we had time and space to debate the issue. We did so exactly in the spirit that was mentioned earlier: not out of a desire to make party political points, but a proper and responsible desire to talk about both the causes of and potential responses to the problem.

I was encouraged, perhaps even inspired, to begin that process—although I share the credit entirely and equally with all my colleagues—by a wireless programme that I heard on Radio 4, on which the mothers of victims of knife crime were interviewed. It was extremely poignant, as one might imagine, and we have all seen or heard similar interviews, I am sure. Those mothers not only described the tragedy of their loss—of course they were going to speak about that, which would have been sad enough—but, chillingly, claimed that people in positions of power did not know enough and, more than that, did not really care. Without bitterness—just as a bold fact—one of the ladies said, “Well of course they do not care, because it is not their children at risk.” When I heard that as I drove to come here, I thought to myself, “I know many people in this House—some better than others, but I know people across the House extremely well—and there is not a single Member of this House who does not care.” We needed this debate and the chance to speak out not just because the matter deserves airing, but because we need to broadcast from this Chamber not only that we care, but that we are prepared to do something about the things about which we care. That was the genesis of this debate.

I had no idea—

Chuka Umunna *rose*—

Mr Hayes: I will give way to somebody whom I know well and like a lot, but only after I have finished this point.

I had no idea that the hon. Member for Gedling in Nottinghamshire, where I spent the first part of my adult life, or the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford in south-east London, where I spent my childhood, were going to follow me at business questions. It was not staged, but it might as well have been, because it was highly effective. The Government responded to our call, and I am grateful to Ministers and, as I said last week, to the Leader of the House for doing so.

Chuka Umunna: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. I am glad that he recalls the audio that he heard on the radio. Just to contextualise

the comment made by the shadow Home Secretary about the sense that people in this House do not care, I have certainly heard, in my constituency, what the right hon. Gentleman heard on the radio, and we must face up to that. Too often, we focus attention on the matter when we see the numbers jump, as they have recently, and the perception is that we forget about it afterwards.

As someone who served in government for some time, the right hon. Gentleman may have noted something that I find disappointing. It is good to see the two Home Office Ministers here, but Ministers from all the other Departments affected should be here, because the only way that we are really going to grip the issue and show that we really care and will do something about it is if there is join up. Where is the Minister for Skills? Where is somebody from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government? That is vital.

Mr Hayes: The hon. Gentleman is of course absolutely right. As has already become clear from what has been said so far this afternoon, the issue touches so many aspects of life that it is bound also to touch many aspects of Government. We have heard about youth services, education, employment and everything that is associated with what sustainable communities are and how they are built. That affects the work of all kinds of Departments, and the work of all kinds of Departments affects those communities. He is right that we require a lateral approach.

The hon. Gentleman will also know, as I do having served in many Departments, that one of the weakest parts of our system of government is its ability to combine the efforts of Departments effectively. It does happen. Sometimes, an initiative, campaign or effort can span Departments, but the nature of how Governments are constructed, with ministerial responsibilities essentially following a vertical pattern, means that it is hard to get Departments to be as effective as they need to be in combining. That is not an excuse, and certainly not a justification, but it is perhaps a reason for why successive Governments have not done as well as they might have done in bringing people together. Perhaps today marks an opportunity to do so. *[Interruption.]* I see the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on the edge of his seat—I first met him when he was a Home Office Minister, and he was a very good one indeed.

David Hanson: I was just moving slightly following what the right hon. Gentleman said, but when Labour was in government and I was the Home Office Minister responsible for policing and security and my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and Baroness Hughes of Stretford, the former Member for Stretford and Urmston, were Education Ministers, I assure him that we met every week for a year as part of a knife crime action plan to try to bring the figure down when the spike mentioned by the Minister occurred. That co-operation between Departments drove a reduction in knife crime.

Mr Hayes: Yes, I did not want to suggest—and I did not, actually—that it does not happen at all. What I said was that we did not do as well as we might. That is not to say that efforts are not made. I was involved in all kinds of cross-departmental work in various Government Departments, including when I did the same job as the Security Minister, who opened this debate. However,

we do need to work more at having that kind of cross-fertilisation, application and collaboration. If the right hon. Gentleman can point to a precedent that could be followed, so be it. Governments should learn from their predecessors, regardless of party. All Governments do some things well and some things badly. All Governments have their moments in the sun and their periods in the darkness, do they not? All Governments have their brightly shining stars, although far be it from me to claim such a mantle. The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) is smiling because, of course, we worked together so effectively in the Department of Energy and Climate Change, and he knows well the approach that I took there.

This is a real opportunity. It may be an opportunity to stimulate just the kind of work I just mentioned. It is an opportunity for the Government to sit back and consider what they are getting right and what they are not, and what more can be done. It is also an opportunity for us to critique the effectiveness of the current policy, and to articulate some new ideas and thoughts about what we could achieve as time goes on.

This debate is a salient one. The hon. Members for Lewisham, Deptford and for Leyton and Wanstead, myself and my hon. Friends the Members for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) and others called for this debate because, although violent crime, knife crime and gun crime are not new, there is a qualitative and quantitative difference now. There has been a step change in volume and a change in the character of the events that lead to the appalling crimes with the consequences that have already been described by others Members.

I want to speak today not really on my own behalf. By definition, I always speak on behalf of my constituents, but I also want to speak for all those who have been affected and are being damaged by these tragic events not just in London—as the Minister and the shadow Secretary of State said—although urban places have of course suffered most, but in places across the country. We have heard already that nearly 40 people have died this year as a result of knife crime and that more than 65 people have lost their lives in London since the beginning of the year due to violent crime. Yesterday, of course, saw a murder on a high street in broad daylight.

It needs to be said that this crime disproportionately affects particular communities. Despite making up less than 2%—about 1.4%—of the whole population, young black men represent a third of the victims of these crimes. We must do something about the disproportionate effect of violence in those communities. We owe all our people a duty; and when we look after all our communities, this House can feel truly proud. But by the same token, if we are not taking action and if any group of the population feels neglected, as the mothers of those victims clearly did, it is a cause not merely of disappointment, but of shame. I do not want to be shamed by a failure to act and I know that Ministers do not either, so let us be clear: we all want to make a difference. We are here because we care about this issue. I know both Ministers on the Front Bench, and I know that they care about getting this right as much as anyone in this Chamber.

Let us now talk about cause and effect, because so far in this debate there has been some meandering between the two. I want to be clear that we cannot just deal with the effects; we have to deal with the causes and we have

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to be honest about them. Yes, gang violence is a part of it. Yes, gang culture is a part of it. Yes, it is fed in part by social media. It is certainly affected by the character of the communities in which these people live. When people's lives are stripped of purpose, they lose pride. When people lose a sense of place, pride and purpose, hopelessness prevails, and hopelessness leads to all kinds of malign and malevolent outcomes, including violence. If people have nothing to belong to, when there is nothing that give their lives shape and meaning apart from the membership of a gang, they are very likely to join one.

Chuka Umunna: I take the right hon. Gentleman's point about gangs, but does he agree that we must actually be very careful about the way in which we use the term "gang"? It is unhelpful to put people, particularly young people, into that bracket because they are not gangsters. In some senses, using the term reinforces the notion that they are. There is also the problem that, if we put the issue into that bracket, we condition agencies and public sector bodies to think, "Oh well, that's how those young people act." There is then almost an expectation that that is how it is, and that we should just put people in that box. Does the right hon. Gentleman share my hesitation about that, not least because—due to social media, as was mentioned earlier—people are no longer acting in big groups, and the situation is much more localised and parochial than it was before?

Mr Hayes: It would be myopic—even misguided—to isolate the reality of violent crime, particularly knife and gun crime, from social and civil decline. We have to look at the character of community and the nature of civil society in order to get to the root of why this is happening at the scale and in the way in which it is. If this is the qualitative and quantitative change that I have described, we have to be straightforward, but also thoughtful, about the cause, and I think that part of that cause is the decline of traditional structures.

I spoke at the beginning of this debate about growing up on a council estate in south-east London. I had an idyllic childhood in a stable, loving family in a strong, responsible community in a place that I was proud to call home. Now, I do not for a moment claim that my family or the others that we lived among were wealthy. We certainly were not wealthy. By that stage, of course, people had a reasonable standard of living. We had enough food to eat, a well-furnished home, a seaside holiday for a fortnight a year—usually in Kent—as well as a polished second-hand car outside the door and a clipped privet hedge. This was not like the background that my father endured of abject poverty before the war; my childhood was not wealthy, but neither was it uncomfortable.

The key thing about that time was that the values that prevailed in that community were the kind of values that encouraged a sense of responsibility and purpose, which delivered the pride that I mentioned earlier. When people are purposeful and proud, they are much less likely to behave in a way that is socially unacceptable and they are certainly less likely to get involved in crime and violence. That is not to say that there was not crime then—of course, there has always been crime—but the character of those communities has absolutely changed

from the time when I was growing up. I am sure that that is about family breakdown and the values that prevailed then that are no longer routine. It is also about all the civilities and courtesies that once informed daily life. I do think that some of that civil and social decline—that communal deterioration—is associated with the way in which individuals behave, and the way in which that behaviour sometimes spills over into crime and violence.

I agree with the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) that of course it is not all about gangs. The point I was making was that, in the absence of a positive social structure, alternative social structures will sometimes fill the void, and they are not all desirable. Some are fundamentally undesirable—indeed, they are malevolent in both intent and character. In essence, that is a very longhand way of saying that I broadly agree with him.

What are some of these social changes? I have spoken of some of them by way of illustration from my own life. We know from endless research that young people who grow up in broken or disjointed families are much more likely to be involved in antisocial behaviour, crime and drugs. We know that, when some of the other ties of community break down, both individual wellbeing and the common good are detrimentally affected. I spoke of having a loving family. There is no better element of civil society than strong, supportive families.

Our popular culture, however, celebrates success over respect, ego over reflection, opinion over knowledge, and desire and feeling over virtually everything else. Social media's role in this is that it may have provided a platform to celebrate some of the things that I have described. Social media perpetuates a very egotistical perspective on the world as it celebrates all kinds of characteristics that are not necessarily those which build strong civil society. Knife crime is a devastating consequence of social and cultural malaise. Crime feeds on excess, irresponsibility and selfishness. From the desolation that flows from the kind of doctrine that places individual interest above communal obligations, and individual will above all else, first lawlessness and ultimately violence springs.

It may be convenient for the wealthy white City worker to believe that recreational drugs are his own private business. He may well assume that, as the godfather of liberalism, John Stuart Mill, would put it, his actions are doing no harm. Yet the boom in the middle-class market for cocaine is the root cause of the recent gang wars over county lines that have resulted in so many young lives being lost. Selfish individualism may indeed benefit those who spend their days safely ensconced in guarded office blocks, in the back seat of an Uber, or in gated communities exclusively for the wealthy, but for others it has resulted in desolation and life stripped of meaning and purpose. We cannot hope to find a successful cure for the wave of violence unless we accept the proper diagnosis.

It is not good enough for Governments to say that they can do nothing about drugs and the drug culture. We need a serious clampdown on middle-class drug use and an examination of how that drug use relates to the kind of violence that we are debating, because the lines of supply and demand are closely associated with gangs, with crime, with violence and with murder. I do not say this because they are my Government, or even my

Ministers, if I might put it that way; I would say it about any responsible Government. The reasons for society's failure to do that thus far are ironically, perhaps even paradoxically, the same as the reasons for the growth in the problems we face.

It is a disastrous consequence of the liberal consensus that stop-and-search was seen as part of the problem. I fundamentally disagree with the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) about this. [*Interruption.*] No, no. Although we are, I hope, having a good-humoured and positive debate, as it should be—there are contributions from all parts of the Chamber that I will hear and certainly value, and I know that that will also add value to the considerations of Government—I do think that there is also a proper place for disagreement. I am going to talk a bit more about this, but I want to start by being very clear: freedom from being searched is really not more important than freedom from knife crime. Where is the freedom in living in fear of gangs, as so many young people in London do? Where is the freedom for young children drawn into a life of violence and crime as the runners for county line drug networks, or increasingly as drug peddlers in small towns and rural communities, as the right hon. Lady described?

The spike in knife crime must be a spur to action, not just for us to toughen our approach, which is urgent and necessary, but also for deeper measures to restore purpose and pride for people in places that are stripped of both. But first, we must restore the safety and security of our communities. That must mean extensive use of stop-and-search. Moreover, the police must be a visible part of those communities. People would be much less antagonistic towards the police—and towards stop-and-search, by the way—if they did not feel that these are the only times that they ever see them. When policemen were a regular feature of local life—when they were seen in circumstances that were not adversarial and were just there as part of the community—they enjoyed a different relationship with those communities. If policemen are seen to be there only when there is trouble, they will be defined by trouble, and that will change the relationship between the law-abiding public and the police.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): On the police's relationship with the public, about a fortnight ago, on a Saturday morning, hundreds of members of the public turned out in the Willenhall area of Coventry because they were concerned about a lack of police numbers at the same time as an increase in crimes such as burglaries and assaults. That gives an idea of the level of public concern, certainly in Coventry and different parts of the west midlands, regarding the question of policing.

Mr Hayes: The hon. Gentleman is always a well-informed and intelligent contributor to these debates, and, not for the first time, I both recognise and respect his view, but I suppose that what I am speaking about is the culture of policing rather than just the extent of it. I was describing a kind of policing that was once taken as read—routine. Policemen understood that their role was largely non-adversarial, with the policeman coming to one's school, popping into the shop to pick up local information, or seen as a friendly face in the town, village, suburb, shopping parade or estate like the one I once lived in.

I am a great supporter of the police, as my local chief constable will testify, and an admirer of all that they do. I do think, however, that a sensible conversation at the Home Office and more widely in Parliament about the kind of police service that we want to grow, and the culture that prevails in it, is timely. People would be much more comfortable with the idea of police engagement if they perceived the police in the way that they once did.

Therefore, I do not think it is entirely about numbers. I am not saying that this is unrelated to them, but I think the Minister was right when he pointed out—as, to be fair, did the shadow Home Secretary—that it is not wholly about numbers. It may be about resources, but it is not wholly and probably not even mainly about them.

Sir Edward Davey: I suggest the right hon. Gentleman reads the serious violence strategy, which says on page 24:

“Some have questioned whether the reduction in the use of stop and search is driving the increase. The data do not support such a conclusion.”

Mr Hayes: I am coming to that now. Although stop-and-search has become more targeted, with 17% of police stops leading to an arrest in 2017 compared with 9% in 2010, we cannot ignore the fact that, in 2010, there were 13,833 weapons-related arrests, compared with 7,794 in 2017. Fewer people are being found with weapons, and fewer people are being arrested for having or carrying weapons with intent. It is all very well speaking about a more targeted approach, but in terms of the numbers—

Sir Edward Davey *indicated dissent.*

Mr Hayes: I have already said that this debate stretches well beyond party politics. I know that it is always difficult for Liberal Democrats to step outside party politics, but I implore the right hon. Gentleman to raise his game and do so. I do not mean to be unkind; I am simply trying to be helpful.

The important thing is that fewer people are being arrested, and fewer people are therefore being convicted. Because of that, inevitably, more people feel they can get away with carrying a knife or a gun.

Sarah Jones: Ten years ago, only one in 10 stop-and-searches resulted in finding anything, and now it is something like one in three. The way that the police stop and search now is much more effective because it is much more targeted and intelligence-based. Surely that is the right approach, rather than a blanket approach of saying, “We're going to stop and search anybody who looks a bit dodgy,” which is what was potentially happening in the past. It is much better for it to be completely targeted and based on intelligence, to ensure that those we stop are much more likely to have weapons or drugs.

Mr Hayes: There is of course a series of bases on which people are stopped and searched. The police are missioned to behave proportionately and, as the hon. Lady will know, there is a protocol associated with stop-and-search. Policemen must make it clear who they are and what they are doing and justify why they are doing it. She is right, of course, that it should not be used permissively. I am simply pointing out the fact that more people are carrying knives and guns and fewer are

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being arrested for doing so. I know that that will be of concern to the Government, and they will want to respond accordingly.

I also want to say a word about sentencing before I conclude. At the moment, as Members will know, there is a maximum four-year sentence for carrying a knife. In practice, as the Ministry of Justice reported recently, the average amount of time that people serve is just over six months. People are serving just over six months for being convicted of carrying a knife, and that is just not long enough. In Scotland, those convicted spend on average a year behind bars, and there is a lower rate of knife crime in Scotland than in England and Wales. Immediate action needs to be taken to address the issue of inadequate sentences.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that there is a vast number of reasons beyond sentence length for the reduction in knife crime in Scotland? It would be wholly false to give the impression that the reduction in knife crime in Scotland is down to sentencing, because there is a lot more to it, as the shadow Home Secretary said.

Mr Hayes: I have already pointed out that the reasons and causes of knife crime and all violent crimes are complex. It seems to me that, if the Scots believe that people should spend longer in prison once they have been convicted of carrying a knife, there may be some lesson to be learned from that. The lesson we might learn is that, if someone thinks there will be a longer sentence if they are convicted for carrying a knife with intent, they might be less likely to do so.

We need to tackle the alienation that has developed between those who grow up and live in the inner city and the highly privileged who often make the policies that affect them. The liberal consensus that has prevailed and that has failed to recognise the decline in the quality of life for many of the people who are most affected by these problems and who live on the frontline of violence is in part responsible for the failure of Governments to take the necessary action. There is a simple correlation, which is a meaningful one, between opportunity and purpose. Many of the communities worst affected by both the threat and the reality of this kind of violence are disadvantaged—the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington made that point. One of their key disadvantages is the lack of opportunity to gain and keep a job or to acquire the skills necessary to do so.

We have a big opportunity to improve the opportunities people enjoy to acquire a skill and then to get a job in which to use that skill. The first Crossrail project allowed us to do that with the development of the Tunnelling and Underground Construction Academy in east London. If we look at the kind of people who trained and did apprenticeships there, we will see that they were not drawn from the predictable, normal group. There were far more women apprentices and far more people drawn from the communities where the academy is based. As Crossrail 2 develops, it is vital that we reach out still further and give more of the people who might be drawn into lives that lead to crime, violence and drugs the opportunity to gain a skill and a job.

This comes back to the point made earlier about cross-governmental work. We need the Department for Education, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Home Office to work together to develop policies that provide the kind of opportunity that feeds hope. We must make sure that Crossrail 2 emulates and improves on what Crossrail 1 achieved for skills and training.

In conclusion, I repeat that I know the whole House cares about social and civil decline and about the quality of life available to the people most likely to be affected by violence, particularly knife crime and gun crime. I know that the Minister who will wind up the debate will want to respond to the heartfelt concerns expressed by Members on both sides of the House, and I know that she does not have a closed mind about what the Government can do or about whether they can do more. I am delighted that the Government have agreed to hold this debate and that, as it has continued, the spirit has been one of collaboration and co-operation. However, this will require a really thorough and robust look at both the causes of crime and its effects and what we do about them. It is no longer enough for us to continue with business as usual. I think the Government and the Minister know that. We must relentlessly address the systemic causes of these problems and be robust in our response with respect to deterrence and punishment. To paraphrase a Labour politician who was once in fashion, we need to be tough on the reasons for violence and tough on its effect.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Although it may appear that we have a lot of time for this debate, many colleagues want to contribute to it, and I urge Members to be considerate of others so that we can get everybody in. With that in mind, if people speak for about 10 minutes, that will be fine, but do be considerate of others, because we cannot have speeches that are longer than those of the Front Benchers.

3.38 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Before I turn to the subject of this debate, I want to pay tribute to those who are currently in Manchester commemorating the events that happened a year ago today, and I am very proud to say that Scotland's First Minister is attending those commemorations. On behalf of Scottish National party Members, I offer our condolences to the families of the bereaved and to send our best wishes to the survivors. I pay tribute to the police, the security services, the emergency services, the NHS and other first responders last year, and most of all, I pay tribute to the city of Manchester and its Mayor for their strength and fortitude in the face of such adversity.

There can be no doubt that serious violence is a scourge on societies and communities across the United Kingdom. We have heard already today about the 22% rise in knife crime in England and Wales—the biggest year-on-year rise ever to be recorded, I understand. We have heard that more than 60 people have been murdered in this great city of London alone this year and that almost 40,000 offences involving knives or sharp weapons have been recorded by police in England and Wales—the highest level in seven years, I believe.

It is clear that current UK Government strategies are not working, and that cannot be swept under the carpet. Nor can the fact that cuts in police numbers and budgets do have an impact on the rise of serious crime. That is not my view—or my view alone: it is the view of the most senior police officer in England and Wales, the Met Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick. She has said in terms that cuts to police budgets play a part in these matters. It is a fact that while, between March 2007 and September 2017, police numbers in England and Wales decreased by 14%, in Scotland, by contrast, police numbers have been maintained since the SNP came to power at almost 1,000 more than under the previous Labour-Lib Dem coalition in Scotland.

I want to be positive today and look at the good news story in Scotland. These matters are devolved and police numbers are not the only area in which the Scottish Government have a positive story to tell; I was grateful to the shadow Home Secretary for alluding to that in her speech.

The infliction of death or assault by knife leaves a scar not only on the victim but on families, friends, neighbours and the wider community. We saw that in Scotland all too recently when, at an Aberdeen school in October 2015, a young man called Bailey Gwynne was stabbed to death. That caused a real national sense of shock and profound loss across Scotland. Despite that recent tragedy in Scotland, knife crime there has plummeted over the past decade. Given the recent spate of stabbings in London, it is understandable that police, politicians and healthcare professionals in England and Wales are now looking to Scotland for a clue as to how to solve the problem.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) said earlier, a decade ago, Scotland—Glasgow, in particular—had a serious problem with knife crime. In 2004-05, there were 40 murders in Glasgow, which represented more than a third of the total homicide rate across Scotland. The figure earned for Glasgow the inglorious title of “the murder capital of western Europe”.

At that time, I was serving as Crown Counsel, prosecuting in the high courts across Scotland. I came face to face with the results of knife crime on a daily basis. So I was particularly pleased when the then Strathclyde police—now part of the Scotland-wide police force—launched a new strategy in response to Glasgow’s epidemic of knife crime. It was a holistic approach that saw the formation of the violence reduction unit, which sought to treat violent crime as a public health and social problem. By treating violence as if it were a disease, the violence reduction unit sought to diagnose the problem, analyse the cause, examine what worked and for whom, and develop solutions that could be scaled up to help others.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central has already spoken about how, as a councillor in Glasgow, she was taken to the sheriff court there to witness gang members listening to evidence given by the mums and girlfriends of young men who had been killed as a result of knife violence. That had a profound effect on the gang members.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. and learned Lady for giving way on this point, which is a critical issue for my city to this day. The success of the violence reduction unit is a great legacy for the Scottish Government, under both Labour and SNP administration.

Critical to gang-related violence in Glasgow is the under-reporting of it in the city. One of the most effective measures that the violence reduction unit introduced was the surveillance of A&E departments, which cast significant light on the true scale of the issue in Glasgow and then enabled the deployment of effective strategies to deal with it. Perhaps that is something that the rest of the UK could learn from the city of Glasgow’s experience.

Joanna Cherry: Yes. The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to that, because the violence reduction unit works with the health service, schools and social workers to observe what is going on and to create lasting attitudinal change in society rather than just a quick fix.

Some mention has been made today of heavy sentences. Heavy sentences do not work. That is not my view but the result of research. That is why in Scotland we have looked at a more holistic approach, which has worked. Again, that is not my view but the view of the professionals who have examined the evidence. The violence reduction unit started out in Glasgow, but it is now a national unit across Scotland that receives long-term stable funding from the Scottish Government. It has been a huge success.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I have listened very carefully to this debate and it has informed me a lot. Does the hon. and learned Lady think that adverts showing how awful the result of carrying knife might be and suggesting that no one should carry a knife would help?

Joanna Cherry: Displaying to those who carry a knife the evidence of the awful results of carrying a knife has worked in Scotland. As I said a moment ago, gang members were brought in to a court setting and they heard evidence from the mothers and girlfriends of young men who had been killed by knives. That kind of education really helps. When I worked as a prosecutor, I became aware that a lot of young men—it is mainly young men—simply have no idea of the potential consequences of wielding a knife. They think they can stab somebody and inflict a minor injury as a warning. So often, however, a stabbing leads to death. It is very important to get that message across. The violence reduction unit has worked in Scotland because it is not just a police initiative but has worked with the health service, schools and social workers to bring in young men who are tempted to carry a knife and to educate them out of the desire to do so.

The approach of the violence reduction unit fits very well with what is called a whole-system approach to crime, which was introduced by Scotland’s first SNP Government back in 2008, after their election in 2007. The whole system approach is designed significantly to change justice policy and focus on prevention rather than punishment. It is also focused on inclusion, making people feel invested and included in the society around them so they will not have the same desire to lash out at it.

The whole-system approach marks a shift away from previous policies that were very much designed to criminalise, label and stigmatise young people. Rather than do that, in Scotland we sought to provide early and effective interventions that kept young people out of formalised justice settings. That does not mean jettisoning a proper approach to criminal justice. If the crimes are

[*Joanna Cherry*]

committed and they are serious enough, they must be dealt with appropriately, but the whole-system approach focuses on collaboration with schools, social work, the police, the prosecution service and the third sector to stop the offending behaviour from happening at all and to reduce the rates of offending behaviour.

In addition to the violence reduction unit and the whole-system approach, the Scottish Government set up the Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice at Strathclyde University. It is dedicated to supporting improvements in youth justice, and works to provide knowledge exchange, practice development for professionals working with young people, and research on youth justice issues. These approaches together have led to a vastly improved situation in Scotland. It is simply not true to say that heavy sentences in Scotland have led to that improved situation. What led to the improved situation in Scotland was the violence reduction unit and the whole-system approach. I recommend those to the House as worthy of study given the current crisis, particularly in London.

The facts speak for themselves. Crime in Scotland is now at its lowest level in 43 years. The crime of handling an offensive weapon decreased by 64% between 2007 and 2017—that is a huge achievement. The number of under-18s in custody has reduced by 77% and there has been an 82% reduction in children referred to a children's hearing on offence grounds. The children's hearings system in Scotland is unique; it seeks to cater for children and young people away from the court system.

Mr John Hayes: Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

Joanna Cherry: I will make some progress, if the right hon. Gentleman does not mind. We are not complacent in Scotland. The problem has not gone away, so tackling violent crime must remain a key priority. That is why my colleagues in Edinburgh, in the Scottish Government, have invested over £14 million in violence reduction programmes for young people since the SNP came to power in 2007.

I pay tribute to one of the programmes that they have invested in—the No knives, better lives youth engagement programme. It has received more than £3.4 million in funding since 2009 and 24 of Scotland's 32 local authorities are now involved. This national initiative works with local organisations to provide information and support. I was asked earlier about advertisements highlighting the dangers of carrying a knife. The No knives, better lives strategy goes much further: it aims to raise awareness of the consequences of carrying a knife and provides information and educational materials for use in schools and by other professionals, as well as health advertising campaigns and information on local activities and opportunities for young people to try to get them away from a culture of gangs and casual violence and into participating in and putting something back into their community. Research suggests that this educational work has been particularly effective in making a difference.

Mr John Hayes: Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

Joanna Cherry: I am very conscious of your strictures on not taking too long, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I am going to wind up now, and I will not take any more interventions.

This is one area where Scotland and the Scottish Government really do have a good news story to tell. Until about 10 years ago, Scotland, and Glasgow in particular, were notorious for violent crime. That is now a historical reputation—not a current reputation—not as a result of some heavy-handed law-and-order approach but because a whole-system approach was used. We need to remember that the young men who carry knives need our help. Some of them are only children. Of course, if they go on to commit a serious crime, they must be dealt with appropriately, but prevention is far, far better than cure.

I am very pleased that the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick, has recognised this and has visited Glasgow and the violence reduction unit to see what lessons can be learned for London and beyond. I was also absolutely delighted that the Solicitor General recently accepted my invitation to come to Scotland to hear more about the whole-system approach from the perspective of the prosecution service, and to discuss moving away from prosecution and towards our early and effective intervention model. I and my Scottish Government colleagues are very much looking forward to welcoming the Solicitor General to Scotland, and I am sure that the Ministers here today would be very welcome to accompany him.

3.53 pm

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (*Joanna Cherry*). I listened intently to her discussing the challenges that they have had in Scotland and the progress that has been made. As she rightly identified, that does not mean that the problem has been completely resolved. There is clearly always more to do.

I welcome the serious violence strategy, which Ministers have put forward in response to a problem that has been bubbling under the surface in this country for some decades and is again manifesting itself with tragic consequences. Tragically, there have been 40 deaths here in London in just the last few months.

Ministers are right to identify four themes in the strategy, but I want to dwell on the misuse of drugs and the illegal drug industry, which has become embedded over the decades, not just in London and the big cities, but in towns across the country. I represent Nuneaton. It is just about the largest town in Warwickshire and is extremely well connected in the middle of the country, just up the road from Coventry and Leicester and not too far from Birmingham. It is on the edge of Warwickshire, where it meets Leicestershire, but is also close to the west midlands in terms of policing.

There is a significant issue with cross-border crime that will not have passed the Minister by. It is not uncommon in my constituency for a tenant, particularly in social accommodation, to be befriended by an individual who then suddenly moves into the property—it is known as “cuckooing”—and very soon there is a satellite drug-dealing den in that property. They then befriend others in the community with inducements—cash and other things—who end up hooked on drugs and beholden to their suppliers. This is a critical issue to some other crimes that my constituents are concerned about.

My constituency has recently seen a spike in burglaries because of the illegal drugs industry and the use of illicit drugs. That extends to further organised crime

and the taking of car keys in burglaries—the aggravated burglary where people are challenged in their own homes for their car keys—and all because some of my constituents over the last few years, although not wealthy, have started to do reasonably well. They have worked hard and now have nice cars and nice things, and they feel threatened by people hooked in locally who end up working for highly organised criminal gangs who want to take that new Jaguar or Ranger Rover and ship it abroad for a fraction of its value—still a significant amount of money.

Tied into this is the challenge presented by the tragic loss of life. I mentioned the 40 people killed in London recently. A few months ago we had an altercation in my constituency between two groups where a man lost his life. He had several children, who have now been left bereft as a consequence. Other people who have nothing to do with these challenges can also get mixed up in tragic situations. I will cite the case of a 20-year-old man in my constituency, Morgan Hehir. In 2015, he was on a night out with friends. They were walking between one pub and another and decided to take a shortcut across a park. They were followed by three men who, regrettably, set upon Morgan and his friends. Morgan was tragically stabbed with a steak knife, and died at the scene. It is very regrettable that some of these people know no boundaries. In this instance, the men even went to the extent of stealing Morgan's phone and his wallet while he lay on the ground, either dying or having already died. That just goes to show the lengths to which some of these people will go, and how low some of them will stoop. As Members can imagine, Morgan's parents have been devastated, his friends have been devastated, and the community has been left devastated.

The issues that we have talked about involving county lines feed into other massive social challenges that we face in our communities. For some months I have been working on a steering group with an organisation called P3, which was commissioned by Warwickshire County Council to support rough sleepers as an outreach organisation. It has become increasingly obvious to the steering group that the majority of the small but significant group of rough sleepers in my constituency are in that position because they have lost tenancies, generally in the social sector.

A frequent scenario is that people move in with someone who has a social tenancy—not always of that person's own volition, because vulnerable people often feel threatened and do not feel able to throw out others who come to stay with them—and those people, often in a flat, end up making life hell for the other tenants in the block. At that point, the tenants who are having to live with the antisocial behaviour are likely to contact the local authority or housing association, and the holder of the tenancy often loses it as a result. It is apparent to me that many people have held two or three tenancies from a local authority or other social housing provider and have lost them because of the actions of others, which is clearly leading to a wider social problem.

So far we have all talked about things that are depressing, but I now want to talk about something that I find quite uplifting within the difficult situation that we face. One of the biggest problems is putting across to young people, in an educational way, that dabbling in drugs, getting hooked on drugs and hooking up with people who are involved with drugs is bad news, and they should avoid it at all costs. I have recently been heartened

by the work of an organisation in Warwickshire called Street Aware, which was started by Councillor Richard Smith, and whose programme director is a lady called Donna Williamson. The organisation works with and trains young people in the issues surrounding drugs and the problems caused by them.

Those young people—they are unpaid, but they want to make a difference in their communities, and I pay tribute to them—then go out to schools and speak to school assemblies. They are speaking to their peers, so it not like one of us going and speaking to young people in a school where we are seen as just people in authority: what do we know? They speak to their peers on the same level, and make very clear to them the difficulties that they will get themselves into if they become involved in drugs. I commend Street Aware, Councillor Richard Smith, Donna Williamson, and those young people who are doing such a good job for our communities. I was recently delighted to attend a National Crimebeat Awards ceremony at which Street Aware scooped second prize for its work for local communities in Warwickshire.

We need more education: we need more education about drugs, and we need to support organisations such as Street Aware. We also need to be doing the same in respect of knives. As the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West said, one of the key planks of the success we have seen, particularly in Glasgow, has been making people aware of the problems that will be caused if they carry knives and use them. Quite often these young people will not want to use a knife, but if they are being threatened and told by somebody who they are running drugs for that they must carry a knife, they will feel compelled to do so, and if they get into a situation where they are challenged and they panic, they might well use that knife without thinking, only to realise afterwards that the consequences for the person they have attacked and for themselves are massive. Using a knife is likely to blight their life as well as that of the person it has been used against.

We must also do more to help young people to engage with society. There are people who engage very well, such as those who play football, go to athletics clubs or attend the Scouts, but there are others who do not get involved in any community activity at all, and we need to look more carefully at how we can get them engaged.

I also welcome the measures in the strategy to do with the police. I welcome the extra support my police in Warwickshire have received recently, and I am glad to say that my police and crime commissioner, Philip Seccombe, is employing an additional 50 police officers in Warwickshire. That might seem a small number to Members who represent city communities, but Warwickshire Police is the second smallest police force in the country and 50 officers represent an extremely important resource. We should also look not just at how many police officers we have got, but how we use them. That is important because many of the offences we are talking about are cross-border crimes; they do not recognise administrative barriers. We must ensure, therefore, that our police forces—whether West Midlands, Warwickshire, West Mercia or Leicestershire—are all working together, sharing intelligence and working with the local authorities in their areas, and that in turn the local authorities and other services are passing intelligence between each other.

Sarah Jones: I serve on the Select Committee on Home Affairs and we went to see the National Crime Agency to talk about county lines. The NCA made the point that these crimes are not just cross-border within this country, but are cross-border across Europe and the world. One of the worries about Brexit that the NCA expressed was that at the moment we can arrest people, follow people and collaborate with other countries, and if we do not get that sorted when we leave the EU, we will be in big trouble.

Mr Jones: The hon. Lady is right from the point of view that the world has in recent decades become a very small place, and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) eloquently pointed out—as did my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security and Economic Crime—there are places from which people can send things through the post right to somebody else’s door; they no longer need a long distribution chain with items changing hands. The Prime Minister has been clear about this country and its exit from the EU and about wanting to maintain that information-sharing, working with other countries in the EU and beyond. Although we are leaving the EU, we are still very much part of Europe and we want to continue to work with our European partners to ensure that we support and assist each other in reducing the amount of crime.

Mr John Hayes: In the absence of the Security Minister, and speaking as the ex-Security Minister, I can tell my hon. Friend that that co-operation is very much part and parcel of how this Government and all Governments operate. Much of it is international, and it is not limited by the European Union. The Five Eyes community is an example of such co-operation. The chances of that co-operation stopping are very slim indeed, because of the mutual interests that lie at its heart.

Mr Jones: I understand what my right hon. Friend says. He has considerable knowledge in this area of policy, and he is absolutely right to say that the will is there to ensure that, on leaving the EU, this country will continue to be a partner of other countries within the EU in tackling the challenges that we all want to deal with.

I welcome the early intervention youth fund that the Government have announced. Our police and crime commissioners, being embedded in their communities across the country, are ideally placed to use that funding to work with local authorities and other partners, whether in the not-for-profit sector or the private sector, to deliver programmes to engage young people and pull them away from gang culture and from communities where they might be vulnerable. I certainly welcome that.

I also welcome the strategy that has been put forward today. This debate has given me the opportunity to put on record a number of my concerns about keeping my constituents safe, and I hope that, through today’s debate, through the work that the Government will do on the strategy, and through the additional measures that the Home Office is taking, particularly in its work with the Treasury, we will be able to tackle some of the underlying issues that have been bubbling under the surface. As I have said, we really must get under the surface to tackle them.

4.11 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I want to begin by thanking the Minister for finally providing the time to debate this extremely important issue. It might interest the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) to know that I have been requesting this debate since 22 March, and I am grateful to everyone in the Chamber who also requested such a debate on 19 April. The Government’s strategy was published on 9 April and finally, on 22 May, we have a chance to debate it. Since I first called for this debate, we have lost 20 people to violent murders in London alone.

Before I begin, I want to urge the Minister to listen and genuinely take on board the comments that have been made by Members across the House today. This is not an issue that we can afford to play politics with. We know that the rise in youth violence has not just happened overnight, and we must realise that developing the right solutions will not happen overnight either. We will not fix violence with a few years’ worth of funding in a single parliamentary term. This will require cross-party working on a generational scale. We need a long-term strategy that Government after Government—I hope one of them will be a Labour Government—will continue to implement, no matter who is in power. We owe this to every person who has lost their life to violence, to every family that has lost a loved one and to every community still traumatised by violence.

Many Members will know that I am keen for us genuinely to address this issue, and that that has been driven by what I see locally. Since I was first elected, we have lost seven young lives: Shaquan Fearon, 17; Naseem Galleze, 17; Kabba Kamara, 23; Jamar Walker, 15; Myron Yarde, 17; Rukeywe Tadafe, 21; and Leonardo Osemeke, 16. In one school year, Lewisham Deptford has lost seven young people to violent deaths. Many teenagers in my constituency know someone who has been stabbed or murdered, and this breaks my heart. Those young people were part of our local community. They had families and friends, and those people are now grieving and hurting. Nobody quite understands why those lives were taken so needlessly and so senselessly. If this happened in a football stadium or in a workplace, we would rightly be crying out for a public inquiry.

In London we have had more than 60 murders since the start of this year, so we all know the Government need to act. We all need to act, and we need to do something different. We need to get in there and understand the root causes. What early interventions can we make to ensure that no young person carries a knife, and certainly never uses one? Prevention and early intervention are what it must be about. No young person is born carrying a knife. Something happens that leads them to feel they need to carry one, be it fears about their safety or a desire to fit in. Thankfully, we all now recognise that prevention and early intervention are better than cure.

I compliment the Government on this strategy, which rightly states that the only way truly to tackle violence is with early intervention and prevention. The strategy talks about using teachable moments to engage with young people, but I do not believe that teachable moment is when a kid turns up at A&E having been stabbed—that is not good enough. Why only then do they have a youth worker to work with them? I want us to be far more ambitious.

We need to start far, far earlier, working with families from birth by providing support such as Sure Start, which works with a child and their family from a pre-school age. Let us have that as the teachable moment, or does it not provide a good enough photo opportunity? The media and the Government, when talking about this issue, always seem to glamorise it: the media, with photos of gangsters or knives, make areas out to be the hood; and the Government with photo ops in A&E or with ex-gangsters.

Our young people are cool. They are cool because they are our future lawyers, bankers, nurses, doctors, social workers, footballers, music artists and, indeed, politicians. They can go on and achieve anything, and we have to ensure that we provide them with the opportunities so they can do anything.

To be brutal, the Government have provided an excellent analysis of the problem but, quite frankly, this is not a decent enough strategy. It is tinkering at the edges. At £40 million, the strategy just is not enough, especially when we consider that, at the same time, £387 million has been cut from our youth services.

The cross-party Youth Violence Commission, on which my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna), the hon. Members for Braintree (James Cleverly) and for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), the right hon. Members for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) and for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and I have been working with our academic partner, Warwick University, has been studying the underlying causes of youth violence for nearly two years.

In February 2018 we conducted a national survey of more than 2,200 young people looking at their experiences of violence. More than 70% of young people tell us they are exposed to serious violence in real life at least once a month, and younger respondents aged eight to 19 experience the most serious violence. More than 16% of young people say they do not feel safe in their own home. Thirty-eight per cent. of young people know at least one person who sells drugs and, shockingly, almost 10% know more than 10 people who do. Forty per cent. of young people agree it is easy to buy illegal drugs where they live. And 33% of young people know at least one person who carries a weapon, and 7% know more than 10 people who do.

Put simply, this shows us that our young people are experiencing adverse childhood experiences far too often. We must do more to address that. I am pleased that the Government's strategy references ACEs and the need to have a trauma-informed approach to policing, the youth justice system and looked-after children.

I am also pleased that police forces in Wales will be piloting a public health approach. We already know from the work of the violence reduction unit in Scotland that closer integration of services and communities can produce extremely positive results, but with just £7 million allocated to this public health approach, following £58.8 million of cuts to Welsh policing, surely the funding does not even fill the gap. We have seen 59% cuts to the Youth Justice Board, but those have been countered by a 23% increase in what we have to spend on our looked-after children. We therefore have to question whether we are paying for failure, because we have not invested in youth services, children's services and schools.

We do know that we can get dramatic results by investing in and taking a public health approach to addressing serious violence; listening to communities, not dictating to them; and seeing the evidence of how such an approach works from Scotland, as the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) mentioned, from Chicago and elsewhere. With Birmingham, Reading and many London boroughs looking to replicate this, surely it is time we seek to do this on a wider scale, empower our communities to do this and look for a public health approach.

We have been listening to people and trying to find solutions that work. As part of the work of the commission, we held a series of evidence sessions where we listened to experts, practitioners and, most importantly, young people on a range of issues, including youth services, trauma and mental health, education and housing. I have visited numerous youth organisations and projects across the country. Our last session took place yesterday, and it covered policing and the criminal justice system. We had an interesting discussion on drugs. Some believed that if we legalised drugs, that would be enough to stop the drugs market. Others rightly identified the disparity between the treatment of, say, a young white kid caught with drugs at university and a young black kid caught with drugs on a street corner. The law is not implemented indiscriminately: black people are twice as likely as white people to be charged with possession of drugs, despite lower rates of drug use.

One thing we agreed on was the importance of educating people on the societal impact of recreational drug use. Many people today are conscious of where they get their clothes, coffee and meat from, but have a blind spot when it comes to the illegal drug market. Many of the people who are so careful to buy only Fairtrade coffee and wear ethically sourced clothes are the same people who do cocaine at the weekends, with no consideration of the wider impact of this habit. Perhaps if there were educational programmes on the real harm caused by the drug market, more people would treat cocaine with the same disdain they do to clothes made in sweatshops or eggs from caged hens.

Mr Hayes: The hon. Lady is making an excellent argument, which associates that middle class so-called "recreational drug use" with the normalisation of drugs and the supply lines that do so much damage. One person's recreation is another person's misery.

Vicky Foxcroft: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, and I think this is probably one area where we would have a cross-party consensus.

Some other clear themes emerged from the commission's evidence sessions and the visits that I undertook. The Government's serious violence strategy has much that aligns with our work, particularly a focus on early intervention, which is crucial. Many young people who are affected by serious crime, either as a victim or a perpetrator, have themselves been subjected to adverse childhood experiences. As a result, they grow up with unaddressed trauma and mental health issues, which can make them extremely vulnerable to negative influences, so support mechanisms are crucial. Young people need to have consistent and safe spaces where they can go for advice and support. Those could be counsellors in school, mentors or role models, community spaces,

[Vicky Foxcroft]

or grassroots charities and organisations. Right now, too many young people do not have access to any of those. We must do more to provide the training and funding for these types of activities. Prevention is always better than cure, and in this case prevention will undoubtedly save lives.

One thing we have definitely learnt from our work is that there are no quick fixes. The path to change will require long-term investment and an integrated approach, with public services, the police, communities and individuals all working closely together. The commission's work has produced a lot of questions that we must address and that are beyond the current scope of the serious violence strategy, because the net has not yet been cast this wide. We must ask ourselves whether our school system is fit for purpose. Police officers in Lewisham have told me that the most dangerous time of day for stabbings among young people is after school and before parents come home from work. Should we therefore consider changing the hour that school finishes at to, say, 5 pm or 6 pm?

We must look at whether young children have enough positive male role models in their lives. Should we look into recruiting 50% male primary school teachers? Should we teach sex and relationship education at an earlier age? Perhaps we should teach primary school children what positive and negative relationships look like. Should our teachers be trained to teach in a trauma-informed way? Should we have dedicated police officers in all our schools, including primary schools, to build up trust with our young people so that they know police officers are safe people to speak to? Should we aim to have a policy of zero exclusions in schools?

Should we revisit the school syllabus, so that we can actually give young people the life skills for future employment—for example, by teaching them about budgeting, getting a mortgage or investing? Should we also teach social media classes that not only prepare young people for employment but ensure that they are safe online? Should we change our history syllabus to ensure it is much more culturally diverse and representative of our communities? Are we providing the right level of mental health support for young people in school?

There are also questions about youth service provision. How do we ensure that there is less needless competition between charities, and instead foster more collaboration? Time and again, grassroots charities see the usual suspects—the large charities that are able to afford bidding teams and that know how the system works—get funding for programmes. How do we provide long-term, sustainable funding for programmes that prove that they get results, run by smaller organisations right in the heart of our communities? As politicians, we have a responsibility to our young people and future generations to answer all those questions.

There is so much more that I could say and want to say, but I want to ensure that everybody gets to speak in the debate. Hopefully, Members can see that the youth violence commission's work has been comprehensive and rigorous. Our initial findings will be published before the summer recess. I am grateful that the Prime Minister has agreed to meet me to discuss our work. As chair of the youth violence commission, I am aware of how many previous reports and strategies successive

Governments have published that have been related to youth violence in one way or another. Many of the recommendations from those reports have never been implemented or, when they have been, progress has not been evaluated. I hope the Government's serious violence strategy does not follow the same path, because young people continue to die on our streets. We owe it to them and to future generations to make sure that we fix this.

4.27 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones). As I listened to his oration, I was struck by the comparison between his constituency—which, incidentally, I have never visited—and my own, and by how many shared experiences we have. It is of course also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft). Although I do not agree with everything that she says, she speaks with such passion and is clearly so very dedicated to this most important of issues.

I think I speak for every single Member of this House in saying that there is no question but that we want to tackle and have a passion for tackling the scourge that is knife crime and youth violence. I wish to touch on a couple of specific points in respect of the serious violence strategy. Several Members have already made the case so passionately and compellingly for why it is so important to get this right: because of the impact of knife crime, violent crime and murder on not just families but whole communities. I particularly remember the cases in recent years of two young people, Nahid Almanea and James Attfield, who were stabbed to death in my constituency. They were horrific murders that really shook and affected the entire community.

I am going to focus on young people and children. Why? Because, in too many cases, children and young people are not just the victims of knife crime and youth violence but, tragically, the perpetrators, too. This problem is not unique to London and our major cities, as my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton said. If we went back 10, 15 or 20 years, we could have probably said that. Would we have seen and heard Members of Parliament for Nuneaton and Colchester making a contribution such as this to these debates? Probably not because instances of this nature were a rarity; they were not commonplace. However, one phenomenon that we have seen, particularly in the past three to five years, is the growth of county lines. It is really concerning how this issue is stretching out further and further from our major cities. First, it was just south Essex, then it moved up to mid-Essex, and now it is prevalent in north Essex and beyond; I reference, of course, Colchester, my own constituency.

Up until there were incidents in my own constituency, I had no dealings with or knowledge of county lines. When we see some of the activity that takes place, of course, it all revolves around drugs. Colchester is just one example; there are towns up and down the country that are being affected by county line operations. When we talk about the individuals who operate these county lines, they are not, in effect, the drug dealers; they are the kingpins—they are the people who never touch drugs. It is the people further down the line who are actually peddling the drugs and bringing to our towns, up and down our country, not just their drugs, but their violence and the intimidation that comes with it.

In one particularly striking incident in the town that I represent, there were six knife attacks in one evening. It was not particularly late—I think that it was about 6 pm in the evening in Colchester. Interestingly, all six were committed by, and perpetrated against, individuals who were not from my town; they were all from London and they were rival drug gangs. They came to Colchester, bringing with them that violence and intimidation to sell drugs on what they saw as a fertile patch—a market that was not, and is not, saturated in the way that London and so many other places are.

The other concerning development, which is also related to county line activity, is cuckooing. This was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton. Again, it was not something that I had come across until a constituent raised it with me on a Friday in my constituency office. Without being over-disparaging, I could see that he was clearly a drug user himself. He said that his flat had been taken over by individuals from London whom he had willingly let in. They were threatening him with a firearm, had huge quantities of class A drugs and were using his property as a base from which to deal and to peddle their drugs over the course of a week, and sometimes two. Sadly, we are seeing that pattern of behaviour repeated.

More worrying than that is whom these vicious drug gangs are preying on in terms of their targeting for the cuckooing activity. It tends to be prostitutes, people with mental health issues, those who are in social housing and particularly isolated and existing drug addicts. They know that these individuals are vulnerable and can be targeted.

That is worrying enough in itself, and an issue that we should tackle, but the greatest concern is the use of children in county line operations and cuckooing—whether it is blackmail or bribing them with money. They may initially be bought a pair of trainers, at which point they have been bought. Seemingly the trainers are a gift, but at that point those children are forever indebted to the drug dealer. There may be threats to their family, or intimidation and violence either on their family or on their person. As my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) said, it may be that the young person wants to reach out and look for somebody who will give them that sense of belonging. It does not really matter; these are young people who are victims.

I want to give the House a hypothetical example—it could easily be real; it is real up and down the country—of a cuckooing activity in which an individual preys on a vulnerable drug user or prostitute. They will pick on social housing, because they know that there are a lot of comings and goings in such blocks of flats and that the dealing of drugs would not be noticed in the way it would in a regular residential property. In that block, there is a young child—perhaps as young as eight, nine or 10—who may have been, as I said, offered trainers or a small amount of money as an inducement to help the individual to sell drugs. The child may have been threatened personally, but more commonly the threat will be against somebody they love, such as their mother, who could be the person in the corner who has just had their hit of heroin. The drug gang targets the one person on whom the young person relies more than anyone else in the world. That threat is enough to force the child to go out and sell drugs, because they are terrified.

We must intervene. What should we do when we get the opportunity? I am not pretending that this is easy, but why are we still treating young people—in many cases, they are children—as criminals? Yes, they have gone out to deal drugs, but what message does it send out when we criminalise a child who has been groomed, threatened, abused and blackmailed with threats against their mother, for example? We need to send out a clear message that children in such situations are not criminals, but victims. Until we treat them as such, things are not going to change.

Of course, that has to be within reason and we need caveats. If a young person or a child has committed a serious offence, particularly one against another person, such as a knife attack, it is right that the police and the criminal justice system take appropriate action. However, it is not hard to identify where these children and young people are clearly victims. It is important that we treat them as such, if no other reason—although there are many—than that the cost of getting things wrong is so great. Not only would the young person or child be set on the wrong path for the rest of their life, but we are labelling them as a criminal. What are their future life chances if they get a criminal conviction at a young age for trafficking or selling drugs? What message does that send out?

We know that drug gangs are increasingly using children as young as eight, nine or 10, as I said, because the gangs know that they are less likely to be stopped and searched and that they tend to be more vulnerable and easier prey for grooming. We know that such things are increasing, and we know that we must break the cycle and intervene. The question is how we intervene.

I welcome the £11 million for an early intervention youth fund, the £3.6 million for a national county lines co-ordination centre, and the cross-party taskforce, which is a good thing, but I encourage close working between police forces up and down the country and the Metropolitan police to break the county lines, which are effectively phone lines up and down the country that are bought and sold like franchises. I also encourage the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who is hugely passionate about this issue, to work with the Ministry of Justice so that we ensure that we treat the young people and children whom we identify as victims as victims, not criminals.

Moving quickly on to sentencing, I am sure that none of us wants to throw vast swathes of young people and teenagers into prison for possession of a knife or an offensive weapon. We all know that it is far better to rehabilitate them in our communities, but that has to be meaningful if it is to work. I would like any under-18s who are convicted or cautioned for a first-time knife-related offence to be sent on a mandatory weapons awareness course as part of any caution or sentence.

I am not making a direct comparison, but we already do this when people are caught speeding at a low level. Instead of paying a fine, people can go on a day's course. I have not done it yet—I wonder how many Members across the House can say that—but those who I know have been on the course have told me that it is quite hard-hitting. Attendees are shown, very graphically, why it is important not to speed. This includes seeing the impact of drivers doing over 30 mph in areas with a

[Will Quince]

30 mph speed limit if they were to hit a pedestrian, including a child. The point is that the course is a graphic reminder of why we should not speed. Why should we not send under-18s who are convicted—or indeed just cautioned—of knife possession on a mandatory course, so that they have to see at first hand the impact that their actions could have?

Lyn Brown: I get where the hon. Gentleman is coming from—it is wholesome. My young people tell me that they carry a knife because they cannot be found lacking. We do not keep them safe, and they therefore feel that they have to keep themselves safe. Although I can see where he is coming from, I am not sure that we are really getting to the root cause or understanding of the problems that we are facing in the inner city.

Will Quince: The hon. Lady makes a valid point. I entirely understand where she is coming from, but I respectfully disagree. I will come to exactly why I disagree in just one minute. I first want to touch briefly on weapons awareness.

The hon. Lady is right when she says that young people carry a knife because they believe that it keeps them safer and they have to carry a knife because everyone else is carrying one. Yet we know that that is a hugely ignorant position because every single statistic out there tells us that people are more likely to be the victim of the knife crime attack if they are carrying a knife themselves. We have to get that message across to young people through numerous mediums—not just in schools and not just to people who are caught carrying a knife. We have to show them what it looks like to be stabbed with a knife and what it would look like to see their mother crying over their body. People need those hard-hitting lessons. As much as I agree with the hon. Lady, we have to give it a go. I think that the bang for the buck would actually be worth while.

Lyn Brown: That is where I was a few years ago, but time has moved on. My little sister is a solicitor. She used to take people into schools to talk about the unlucky stab—that is, when people did not mean to kill somebody, but they cut an artery and so on. These people would talk to kids about the impact of the unlucky stab on their lives and the lives of others. But I am not sure that that is actually where we are now, because of what the hon. Gentleman is talking about: county lines and organised crime, which have changed the whole gang situation entirely.

Will Quince: The hon. Lady again makes a very valid point. I do not disagree with her. She is almost certainly right when we are talking about mid-teenagers, late-teenagers and people in their early 20s, but we need to reset the dial and start this education in primary and secondary schools now. I am not suggesting that this is a panacea. I am not even suggesting that it is a quick or easy fix, but it has to be part of a solution and a package of measures that will help to eradicate knife crime in the medium to long term.

There is an organisation in my constituency called KnifeCrimes.Org, which is run by a lady called Ann Oakes-Odger. In the neighbouring constituency, a lady

called Caroline Shearer runs another organisation called Only Cowards Carry. These inspirational women each lost a child to a knife crime attack—hugely tragic—but they have harnessed that energy and set up charities that are doing such great good around weapons awareness, particularly in schools. I look to the Minister because these organisations need funding in order to survive. In some cases, that comes via the police and crime commissioners, but I want to see more central funding made available for these organisations, which do such good work at a grassroots level.

I have been on one of the courses. I sat in a school and watched one of the presentations, it was really hard-hitting. Everyone leaves thinking, “Wow.” We were shown on a huge projector what numerous knife wounds look like. We learnt about the impact on families. If I had watched one of those presentations as a seven, eight, nine or 10-year-old, or even in the early stages of secondary school, I would have found it quite compelling.

Too many young people are carrying knives, and we need to understand why that is by getting in early. That is why primary schools are so important. We need to show these young people, as I mentioned to the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), that a knife does not keep them safe; statistically, it makes them far more likely to be the victims of a knife crime attack. We must hammer that message home—not just in schools as part of weapons awareness education, but as part of social media activity and in TV ads like those being run in Scotland. There has to be an overall package of measures to show them how it feels to have a life shattered by a member of their family losing their life through a traumatic weapons attack.

May I gently push the Minister on a couple of things? We need weapons awareness classes in school. We must support the organisations up and down this country that are providing that and support the creation of new ones. I would like to see mandatory weapons awareness sessions as a condition of a conviction for someone caught carrying a knife. It is not acceptable just to give them a caution, a slap on the wrist, and an “Off you go”. We have to do more by sending them on a mandatory course. Yes, there is a cost to that, but I think it would pay dividends in terms of the number of people for whom we could break the cycle. I also encourage the Minister to push for closer working between local police forces and the Metropolitan police to tackle the growing issue of county lines, which we desperately need to resolve.

Finally, probably the most important message that I can impart to the Minister is this: please, please can we treat the children and young people who are caught up and groomed, victimised and intimidated into county lines activity and drug dealing as victims, not as criminals?

4.46 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince). The House is indebted to him for a speech that showed great understanding of the problem of county lines and how this new way of distributing drugs is harming individuals, families and communities; and also for the fact that he had some very constructive proposals to put to the Minister. I support him in that. I dare say that he might not like this comment, but it almost sounded like a Liberal speech. He was right to

focus on county lines. I think that the strategy is very good on that problem. His point about co-ordination between different police forces is really important.

I will be very interested to see whether the Minister has any comments to make about the drug dealing telecommunications restriction orders that are now being rolled out. In his opening remarks, the Security Minister talked about some initial signs of real success in that they are seriously disrupting county lines. We must hope that they will continue to do so. I hope that Ministers will be able to report to the House about the success of those orders as we go forward in tackling county lines.

I wanted to start my remarks by remembering the victims of the terrorism in Manchester last year, as spokespeople for the other parties have done. I very much agree that those victims should be in our thoughts today, not least as we discuss this particularly important issue. We saw the tragedy of the families who were bereaved—the mothers, fathers, daughters and sons. That must be in our thoughts. The fact that the people of Manchester responded so powerfully together in their unity is something that we should celebrate.

I also want to talk about real people in the rest of my speech. In my constituency we have had people suffering from the effects of knife crime. I have been particularly engaged with a family who lost a son in June last year. Derick Mulondo was in his 30s. He was stabbed by a former partner. He was one of those people who everyone loved. He was a community activist. Young people would see him as a leader. He would go and organise football matches at the local park. After he was taken from us, the young people would go to his mother's door and say, "Now Derick's gone, who do we look to?", so we doubly suffered as a result of that awful murder.

His mother, Sophie Kafeero, is one of the most courageous people I have ever met. She is still suffering, and she goes to her son's grave very regularly to talk to him. She, in her grief, has had support from Derick's friends to set up a campaign called "Drop a Knife, Save a Life". That campaign is in its infancy, and I hope that in due course it will make an application to the Government's community fund, because it could do a lot of good work with other organisations such as Oxygen in my constituency, which is also tackling the problems of knife crime.

We must learn from these victims and listen to them—listen to their pain and their strength, and listen to what they are saying about what needs to be done. The Government have done some good things to support community initiatives, but I urge them to go further, because I am afraid there are too many mothers like Sophie.

The strategy has many positive aspects. I will come to some criticisms in a minute, but the positive aspects are worth focusing on. Some of the analysis in it, written by good Home Office officials and with lots of evidence, is definitely worth reading and debating, because we need our policies to be evidence-based. I wish more of the Government's policies were evidence-based. Let us hope that this one will be.

The fact that the strategy puts prevention high up the agenda was welcomed across the House and the country. There are some issues with putting money behind that, but ensuring that prevention is a priority is important.

A few Members have touched on the international aspects we are facing, which we need to say more about, and I will come on to that.

Some of the Government's initiatives deal with new aspects of the debate, including not just county lines but social media and its link to drug distribution, and the glamorisation of drugs; young people are told about the money they can make, but they are not told that they could lose their lives. Social media is having such a big impact. I think the Government are taking that seriously. I may question their judgment and their decisions at times, but I do not question their motives on this at all.

As other Members have said, two big things are missing from the strategy. The first—I am sorry to say this to the Minister, but I have to—is the lack of acknowledgment of the impact of police cuts. If we look at the evidence printed in *The Guardian*, which was not published and which the former Home Secretary said she had not read, it is absolutely clear that the cuts were likely to have been a contributory factor to the rise in violent crime.

The other key problem, linked to that, is resources. This puts a challenge to the Government. They talk about the need for prevention, but a lot of the activities in local government, the health service, schools and the police that were focused on preventing crime in the first place have been cut, and the Government's welcome extra funding mentioned in the strategy does not come close to replacing the money that has been lost.

Let me return to some of the policies, which are important. The strategy refers to the "large potential benefit to preventative intervention".

It talks eloquently about the need for both universal preventive interventions and targeted interventions, and that is worth focusing on. The strategy talks about looking at young people and families where there is a combination of high-risk factors, and where it is very beneficial for the local authority, Government and police to come together to intervene really early. We hear about early intervention on so many subjects, but here it is about saving lives. The Government should talk more about that and then put the money behind it. Other Members have touched on the importance of helping children who have had chaotic lives, whose health and education have been affected and who are so vulnerable to the drug gangs that prey on them. Unless we intervene to help them, we are setting the whole of society up for failure.

Lyn Brown: I have been working with mums whose children are or have been involved in county lines, and one of the messages they are very keen to get across is that this could happen to anybody, whoever they are. A police officer who spoke to me the other week told me about how the child of one of their colleagues had got involved. I want us to be very aware of the fact that this could genuinely happen to anybody, and we should not stereotype any group of people we think may be involved.

Sir Edward Davey: The hon. Lady makes a fair point. She has actually anticipated what I was going to say next. One of the other groups who are very vulnerable and are preyed on are those with mental health issues. As she said, this could happen to anybody or any family. That comes back to the crisis in child and

[*Sir Edward Davey*]

adolescent mental health services. As I am sure is the case in colleagues' constituencies, CAMHS are absolutely on their knees. If we are talking about prevention, we really must tackle that as quickly as possible.

I want to talk about the positive international aspects of the serious violence strategy. Some of the statistics, particularly those on pages 19 and 20, show that Britain may not be alone in experiencing such a rise in violent crime. I know that the Government are planning an international symposium in the autumn, and that is very important. It may well be that issues such as austerity—the cuts in state spending not just in the UK but in other developed countries—have had an impact. Let us be frank about that. Linked to this are the growth in social media, strengthening organised crime, bumper coca crops in Colombia and the reduction in prices. All these international elements wash up on our shores and affect our communities as well as other countries.

We need to work with other countries; in doing so, let us learn from them—their successes should be shared with the House—and remember the importance of international co-operation. I forget which colleague said that Brexit may undermine such co-operation. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) brushed that aside, but he is totally wrong. I had the privilege of going to Eurojust and Europol in The Hague 10 years ago to see how with them, and tools such as the European arrest warrant and joint initiatives, we could be far more effective in catching criminals and bringing them to justice. Let us remember that the sort of criminals Eurojust and Europol go after, using the European arrest warrant, are the organised criminals who span boundaries. I know that colleagues who think Brexit is a terribly good idea will say, "Don't worry. It's in everyone's interest to work together". Yes, it is, but we will not be in the room or making the rules for Eurojust and Europol's use of the European arrest warrant. These are relatively young tools that will be more and more developed in the future, but we will not be in the room.

Anyone who goes to see how Eurojust operates will find that there is just one representative from each member state, and when there is an investigation—such investigations often involve drugs—a representative just calls those of the other member states through which the investigative forces will have to travel to arrange the right warrant and so on. Such co-operation can happen at lightning speed so that we can catch the criminals who try to escape justice by playing people off against each other and going across jurisdictional boundaries. By not being in the room, we will undermine our ability to take on such organised criminals, so although the Government are right to talk about international co-operation, they are not really in a very good place.

My final point about international co-operation concerns the Border Force. We often think about the Border Force in terms of stopping illegal immigration, but it is actually critical in stopping drug trafficking. The Border Force has been devastated, particularly when the current Prime Minister was Home Secretary, which is not a good policy if we are trying to tackle serious violent crime, county lines and the Mr Bigs behind such vulnerable people. We should be most worried about the Mr Bigs, but dealing with them requires an international response.

Before I finish, let me talk a little more about some of the problems in the strategy. I have talked about resources, but I want to come back to that issue. The strategy itself says:

"The recent downward trend in arrests and charges for some crimes lessens the certainty of punishment."

In other words, because there are fewer police officers, fewer people are being arrested and charged. [*Interruption.*] I accept that the strategy does not say that, Minister, but I quoted it directly initially. The downward trend in arrests and charges has come only because there are fewer police officers. I say to the Minister that we need more detectives, as serious crime is rising and we need to go after the perpetrators. Not only that, but if we cannot arrest the perpetrators in the first place because there are fewer officers, that will reduce the deterrence against crime because people will think that they will not be caught. That is a real issue.

I lament the fact that the Government have not reacted quickly enough to the uptick in serious crime over the past two years. We have learned how to use police officers more efficiently, particularly with the new technique of hotspotting. The evidence shows that that can be very effective against drug dealers and all sorts of criminals. We know more about getting the best value for money out of the police, and reducing their numbers at this time just does not make sense. The shadow Home Secretary quoted Cressida Dick, and Ministers should be learning from her.

Finally, I know that the strategy includes an inter-ministerial group but, as other colleagues have mentioned, if we are going to take the approach that the Government rightly set out in the strategy, we have to see more cross-departmental work. This will come from the top only if Cabinet Ministers are sitting around the table regularly chasing the issue and making sure that their departmental officials see this as a top priority. I am afraid that I will not be convinced that the Government are treating this as a top priority in the cross-Government way they should until we start hearing the Secretaries of State for Education, for Health and for Housing, Communities and Local Government talking about it. When they talk about it, we will take the Government seriously because they will really have got the message.

Let me end by reminding the Minister—I am sure that she knows this, but I will remind her anyway—about why we need to take the issue seriously. Families out there are grieving and they want to know that we are responding as a Parliament and Government to the crisis; and it is a crisis. People have been taken aback by the rapid rise in violent crime, whether that involves knives, guns or acid. There is a sense that things are slipping out of control.

The serious violence strategy and the Mayor's measures could not come early enough, but we have to redouble our efforts. When Ministers are sitting around the table with the Chancellor making representations, they really have to see that this must now be the top priority. They will have the support of the whole House if they do that. They will certainly have the support of the British people.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We are not doing very well on the target of 10 minutes per speech, which Members were asked to aim at some

time ago. Speeches have ranged in length: 15 minutes, 16 minutes, 18 minutes, 19 minutes and 17 minutes—quite a lot more than 10.

Lyn Brown: Indeed it is!

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am glad that the hon. Lady approves of my arithmetic. I am sure that we can manage this debate without the need for a formal time limit, which limits how the debate works. Will colleagues please try a little harder to stick to around 10 minutes? Then everyone will get in and it will be fair and equal.

5.4 pm

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I now feel under a significant degree of pressure. I will crack on.

I welcome the strategy. Right from the start, and peppered throughout, the strategy makes the point that the issue cannot be resolved by just arresting people. That is absolutely key. Police intervention must form an important part of the solution, but it is not the only solution. I will come on to my thoughts about police intervention, and, in particular, I will address the points about police resourcing that were raised by the shadow Home Secretary.

In the years immediately preceding my election to the London Assembly, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) being voted in as the Mayor of London, the murder rate in London reached unacceptable levels. Without a shadow of doubt, the previous Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, had not taken the issue as seriously as he should have done. Indeed, he accused the reporting of murders in London of being a media construct, with the particularly vile and inappropriate line

“If it bleeds, it leads”,

implying that the murders were being reported only because they were sensationalist stories.

In 2008, when my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) and I were elected to London government, getting a grip on the unacceptable level of violent crime in London was a priority. It was done in two parts. First, Operation Blunt 2 was immediately initiated. The shadow Home Secretary, I think quite fairly, ran through some of the question marks over Operation Blunt 2. It is always very difficult to measure the exact implication of a policing strategy. She asked what message or signal it sends when politicians do or do not take action. Under Ken Livingstone, the message sent was that City Hall did not take this as seriously as it should have done. We were very clear that the message we wanted to send was that this was absolutely a priority for the incoming Conservative administration in City Hall.

Operation Blunt 2 was a very high profile, visual, police-led operation which made it completely clear that knives were unacceptable and that people carrying knives would be arrested and charged. I do not row back from the importance of such visual policing operations, but we were also very well aware that a policing response on its own could not and should not be the only response to knife crime. That is why, in addition and in parallel to Operation Blunt 2, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire and I worked

together to produce the Time for Action youth violence strategy, which addressed a series of potential intervention points in the lives of young people, up to and including rehabilitation of offenders.

There was a programme in Feltham young offenders institution to get young men who had been incarcerated after involvement in knife crime on to rehabilitation programmes, with a gateway to employment with a number of employers directly from the gates of that YOI. While they were on a ROTL—a release on temporary licence—they would be able to start working for their future employers before they had completed their sentence, so they had the incentive to stay on the straight and narrow when they came out of prison. We also considered looked-after children who, unfortunately, still disproportionately find themselves involved in criminality. The sad truth to this day is that looked-after children are still more likely to go to prison than to university. That is an unacceptable truth, but we worked to address that.

We looked at community programmes and diversionary programmes in communities. As the Mayor's youth ambassador, I visited numerous programmes that were doing fantastic work around London. We also looked at such things as uniformed youth organisations, including the Scouts, the cadets, the Boys' Brigade and Girl Guides. Why? Because in many parts of London, they became the quasi-parents of children who often led very dysfunctional lives. I had the pleasure of meeting the air cadets squadron not far from this place. They have an amazing mix of young people, from some of the most wealthy and privileged families in the country to children of recent refugees and some impoverished people. They rub shoulders, mix together and work in that military structure, which we know so often develops the kind of life skills that help to keep people out of trouble. Why did we do these things? We did them because we knew that we had to work upstream and had to do them to prevent young people from getting into trouble.

The shadow Home Secretary, who is not in her usual place, although she is in the Chamber, made the point about police resourcing. It is worth remembering that we halved the number of young people who were murdered on the streets of London between 2008 and 2016 against the backdrop not just of tightening budgets, but of having to deliver the policing operation for the Olympic and Paralympic games, which imposed a huge operational burden on the police. Yes, police officers, police numbers and police funding matter, but—

Mr Lammy: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Cleverly: I will.

Mr Lammy: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I want to put on record that the 2011 riots happened during that period. Against the backdrop of the riots, many of those young people were put in prison and that reduced the numbers, because the whole subject was about gang violence—he forgets all the media coverage at that time.

James Cleverly: I am sorry, but the right hon. Gentleman is wrong. The idea that somehow the police response to the 2011 riots swept potential murderers from the streets and locked them up is just statistically wrong. *[Interruption.]* No, the big drop in teenage murders in London happened in the operational year—

Mr Lammy: In 2012.

James Cleverly: No. There was a massively significant drop in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 elections—in the 2008-09 year followed by the 2009-10, preceding the 2011 riots. [*Interruption.*] I am going to try to make some progress, because I promised Madam Deputy Speaker that I would.

The philosophical underpinning that works with the Time for Action strategy and the work that we did in London is exactly the same as the one that works here. That is why I welcome this strategy so much. I am very pleased that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), is responsible for driving this through. We have spoken about it previously, and I do not think I am giving away any trade secrets if I say that I know her personal passion for getting this resolved.

As I come to my conclusion, I want to say—this has been mentioned by others—that we have to educate our young people, and I have discussed plans for doing that. However, we also have to educate the people who think that drug use—that occasional line of coke at some middle-class party—is a victimless crime. It is not. There is an absolute causal relationship between that so-called victimless crime at some party or some club and the kid that lies bleeding out in the stairwell of a block of flats in south London. Until we look people in the eye and remind them of that fact, this problem, as much as we try to mitigate it, will not go away. That might be a difficult conversation to have. To have celebrities bragging on social media about their drug use is unacceptable and it needs to be called out.

My final point is not explicit in the serious violence strategy, but it is implicit in what it says about some of the preventive measures that the Government are pursuing. It is that we need to find a way—I do not pretend that it is easy or that a solution would be perfect—of capturing the downstream savings of preventive activity, so that they can be recycled to fund those preventive activities. For example, typically, the layer of government that takes responsibility for diverting young people away from crime tends to be local government, which often funds community projects and so on. If it is successful, the bit of government that reaps the savings—through not incarcerating young people—is the Ministry of Justice, but there is no practical way of recognising the downstream saving, harnessing it and reinvesting it in the diversionary activities often discharged by charities and local government in the first place. If we could do that, I have little doubt that it would only take a small percentage of the downstream saving to put these projects on a much more stable financial footing.

I know that my hon. Friend the Minister works incredibly hard—she is famous for it—and I hate loading up her shoulders with extra work, which she will tell me off for later in the Tea Room, but if anyone can come up with a plan, she can. I am more than happy to help. This is my offer and my ask. If we can find that alchemy, that way of capturing the savings and reinvesting them in front-end projects, we could really make a difference. I have little doubt about the Government's commitment. It saddens me that some Members—unintentionally, I assume—question the Government's commitment to protecting the lives of young people,

and I urge the Opposition spokesperson, when he sums up, to be cautious about accusing anyone in the House of being uncaring on this issue.

5.16 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The rise in violent crime in recent months should concern us all. Lives have been needlessly lost and the public are rightly concerned. The position we find ourselves in has many factors at play, and I agree with the serious crime strategy's assessment that tackling serious crime is not a law enforcement issue alone, but I am firmly of the view that the cuts to our police forces up and down the country are key to the recent rise in violent crime.

The Government must surely recognise the severity of the situation when an apolitical figure such as the Commissioner of the Metropolitan police suggests that Government cuts have played a significant part in increasing levels of violent crime. For far too long, the Government's stock response has been to accuse the Labour party of playing politics. When I raised this issue at Prime Minister's questions last month, the Prime Minister attempted to dismiss my concerns as hyperbole and even suggested that the shadow police Minister was alone in seeing a correlation between the rise in serious crime and cuts to police numbers.

Cressida Dick's recent comments have vindicated the sterling work of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) and showed that these are indeed genuine, well-founded concerns. If the country's most senior police officer is suggesting that we are in the midst of a funding crisis for our police forces, it is high time the Government took note and reversed the chronic underfunding that has gone on for far too long.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is clearly a link between police cuts and violent crime? I represent a seat in south Yorkshire that has seen a 57% increase in violent crime in the last year—one of the highest in the country.

Ellie Reeves: I agree with my hon. Friend that there is a link between the rise in violent crime and police cuts, and our concerns cannot be dismissed as playing party political games. As a London MP, I am acutely aware of the damage that sustained central Government cuts have had on our police force. The Met has had to make savings of more than £600 million, and more savings are required. Around my constituency, both safer neighbourhood front desks, in Catford and Penge, have closed, and across the capital officer numbers are dangerously close to falling below 30,000.

Some may argue that the Met gets funding from the Mayor of London. They would be correct, but even after the council tax precept increase, which has already been raised to the highest level by the Mayor, the Met will still need to make additional savings of £325 million by 2021. More importantly, the Met relies on central Government for over 70% of its funding, and this shortfall has been caused by successive Conservative Administrations. The reality is that there is nobody for them to pass the buck to when it comes to the issue of police funding.

Yet while we have seen funding continually fall over the past few years, there has been an irrefutable rise in serious crime. In London, knife offences now total over

12,000 each year, which is a 17% increase since 2013, and firearms offences are up 34% to over 2,000 a year. When I spoke about serious crime in London during Prime Minister's Question Time, the number of murders in the capital this year stood at 57. Now, five weeks on, the number is approaching 70, and 41 of those murders have been stabbings. Since my election last year, I have met a number of constituents who have been directly affected—most tragically, the families of two young men who were stabbed to death.

Only cross-party efforts can help us to fully rectify the horrendous rise in violent crime. Political decisions can change the situation for the better. The Mayor of London has done his part, allocating an extra £110 million to the Metropolitan police through a rise in the precept, but we have a Conservative Government who are still blind to the fact that chronic underfunding of police forces has its consequences. The serious and organised crime strategy choreographed by the former Home Secretary—the present Prime Minister—raised some important points, but they are meaningless if our police forces are unable to carry out their day-to-day duties because of reductions in central funding. It is another case of the Government's giving with one hand and taking with the other.

The strategy raised several points about youth involvement that are entirely valid, and the aim of spending £40 million on early intervention and prevention is welcome, but it is set against a backdrop of sustained long-term cuts in youth services and schools since 2010. The cuts in services that may have previously helped young people at risk of being involved in serious crime are symptomatic of the “cuts and austerity” culture that the Government have normalised, with utter disregard for the results of their actions. Moreover, the Government can come up with as many strategies for combating serious crime as they like, but unless our police forces are given appropriate levels of funding and resources, they are wasted exercises filled with hollow words.

The Government can do something, and they should do something. They should do something today. The Conservative party has previously positioned itself as a party of law and order. That rhetoric has long ago worn thin, and it is patently obvious to many in the House and beyond that increasing police funding from central Government is crucially important if we are to deal effectively with serious crime in the long run. More funding would see more officers and better resources. Do it today; do it now.

5.22 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves). She made some very good points, and made them passionately—and I know that she is passionate about the security of the community she serves.

For the past year, my community in West Ham has been haunted by violence. Since the start of 2017, nine young people have been killed in my constituency alone, and today I want to remember them. They are Titu Miah, Pietro Sanna, aged 23, Ahmed Deen-Jah, aged 21, Benjamin Pieknyi, aged 21, Taofeek Lamidi, aged 20, Abdul Mayanja, aged 19, Sami Sidhom, aged 18, Lord Promise Nkenda, aged 17, and Corey “CJ” Davis, aged just 14, and shot in a playground.

That is not the final roll-call. There have been so many more children and young people with life-changing injuries caused by the dreadful, almost unrestrained violence over the past 18 months—saved just by luck, or by our amazing national health service. I want to think about all of them today.

Our latest young man to die needlessly and tragically was Sami Sidhom. He was stabbed last month on the street outside his home when returning from a West Ham game. He was a bright, well-loved, quiet young man, studying at Queen Mary's College in London. He was doing really well, and was not involved in any crime or any gang. His neighbours rushed out of their house to help him. They were talking to him and comforting him when he died from his wounds. I have seen the pain, the anger and the fear of the community in which he lived. His father's heart broke in my arms.

The whole community are traumatised. Their only outlet so far is talking to each other, because there is absolutely no support for them. There is no aftercare. The young man who told me about how the blood was running through his fingers, how he did not know what to do and he could not save Sami's life: there is nothing available to him today. There is no one I could pass him to, who could take some of that trauma away. So people in the community are gathering together for comfort and looking for things to do, but I think we can do better than that, which is why I agree with many who have spoken today that this is a joined-up cross-Government issue; we need somebody from the health service to help us out, give us some money and make sure proper counselling is available for those who are traumatised.

We in this place need to face up to some truths, too. All of us of all parties have allowed these circumstances to be created. Those who are dying are so young, and so are many of those who have blood on their hands, but they did not create these circumstances for themselves; effectively, all of us—I am gesturing a huge circle now—helped to create them. We as adults, we as people in authority, we as policy-makers, we as budget-holders, we who did not see what was happening, have allowed our streets to become what they are.

Let us face some facts. Too many of our children now live in fear, convinced that the authorities cannot, or will not, protect them from harm. Too many of our children have no trust whatsoever in the systems we have created so they simply do not engage. Too many of our children believe their potential will not be recognised or nurtured by our society. Quite simply, they have so little hope that they see no future for themselves. That is why they take such massive risks.

These facts make our children far more vulnerable to exploitation by criminals, including those who run county lines. These people have created a cruelly efficient business model to distribute and sell drugs, using our children as expendable cheap labour to enable large profits. It is a cycle of exploitation and grooming that has become an industry. Often the children targeted are bright and charismatic with such promise, and that is why the gang leaders want them so much—because they make such great sales people. We need to find a way to empower our young people so they know how to recognise the power and the tactics of the groomers who are using them to sell the drugs. They need to know how to say no; they need to be given the skills and tools to resist the manipulation of the groomers.

[Lyn Brown]

As has been said in the debate, for many of our people who end up selling drugs, or even killing or dying because of a drug gang, the downward spiral starts with something simple like being befriended by a cool older boy—a new best friend who gives them chicken and chips or new trainers. They take the older boy's gifts and respect, but it does not take long before those gifts become debts and that respect becomes domination. By the time realisation dawns, it is too late. We must find a way of giving our young people the resilience to resist grooming, and that requires peers, teachers, youth workers and role models making them aware of where accepting that gift of chicken and chips may lead. That will take resources; it will require improving training for teachers and social workers so that safeguarding becomes as much about looking for signs of gang grooming as about spotting child sexual exploitation.

In truth, we do not have a handle on the scale of the exploitation and grooming that drug dealers are engaging in. Even if children and social services are aware of the scale of the problems and the tactics deployed by those running the county lines—and some of them, woefully, are not—they are already massively overstretched. We need to expand their role and give them the training, and that, again, is going to require some resources.

Some young people know or suspect who is responsible for some of the terrible crimes I am talking about, and they might well hold evidence or be able to provide eyewitness accounts that would be helpful to us in a court of law. The information is out there that would help us to catch the people responsible, but the young people who have that information live in a really uncertain, dangerous and deeply scary world. They do not trust; we have done nothing to earn any trust.

I say to the Minister that we need to find a safe space where young people can report this information, and I do not think that that safe space is Crimestoppers, however much my local police encourage people to use it. Young people simply do not believe that it will be confidential. They assume that, if they ring, their call can and will be traced and that a police officer will come knocking on their door. They know that if that happens, they and their families will be punished for snitching by the gang members and drug dealers. They do not trust us to keep them safe, and who can blame them? Third-party reporting, run by a trusted organisation, would be a really good step. It would help us to gather information and address some of the unsolved murders in our communities.

We also need to have a genuine, believable and appropriate offer for those young people who do the bravest of things—namely, give evidence in court against gang members and really serious nasty criminals. They need to know that we will look after them and their families and keep them safe afterwards. They need to know that we will help them to make a new life. We do not do that at present. I know a young man whose life was completely destroyed because he did the right thing. He gave evidence, and then he ran. He was terrified, and he ended up in a community that was completely different from home. He was lost and frightened, and then he was attacked one night. He fought back, but he did so disproportionately, according to the court. So despite the fact that it was he who was attacked and the initial

victim, he is now serving time in jail, and I understand that he could well be deported to a country that he has never known after he has served his sentence. We should have done better by him. We owed him that much. His story is known in my community, so why should other young people put themselves at risk in order to give us the information that we need? Why should they help, when that would only make their lives and their families' lives much worse?

Most of the people in this place have grown up knowing that they have choices and that many opportunities will be open to them. Tragically, most childhoods in my community are just not like that. Sixty-five per cent. of the children in Newham grow up in poverty, knowing that their parents are always thinking about how to pay the rent and the bills and how to put food on the table. Children live with that stress. They watch their parents struggle day in and day out, and they see their future as being the same. It chips away at their dreams, because they know that their parents are working every hour and trying so hard but that it is not bringing them prosperity or security. Our children need some hope for the future.

In West Ham, we have had the worst of it. My community is, as I say, traumatised. We need to work together to make real changes so that we can keep our children safer than we have managed to do thus far. But we also need the resources that we currently lack if we are to destroy the criminal base that is blighting our communities and provide the hope and opportunity that our children deserve. I will work with absolutely anybody in order to get that.

5.33 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I have sat here throughout the afternoon listening to many people, and I look forward to the contributions that are to come. We have heard descriptions of what has happened in our country, not least from my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) just now. We have heard about children and young people being murdered on the streets. We have heard of county lines and of the horror they bring. We have heard of the desperation in communities about what can be done about that.

As someone said at the beginning of the debate, why are we debating this only now, perhaps months after we should have been debating it? Why has not the House—all of us, including me—been roaring about this for months? My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) is an honourable exception, as are one or two other Members, but why has this House not been at the heart of the nation?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) has been speaking up about the black community and about some of these issues for years, but why have we, as a collective, not been roaring about it? A massive 67 people have been murdered in London this year. That is an unbelievable figure. Imagine if the figure were aggregated and spread across the country—astonishing.

Serious violence is rising everywhere. It is not just about policing, but policing is part of it; it is about all of these things. Of course everyone cares, but this is a national emergency. This is a crisis for our country. If this were happening in any other context, there would be emergency statements by the Prime Minister and

calls from both sides of the House to do something about it. The county lines are a relatively new phenomenon, and who knows how many children they affect? Children in our country, some as young as 10 or 11, are being exploited by criminal gangs to move drugs. I do not know what law it will take or what should be done, but I do know that that is totally and utterly unacceptable to every single Member of this House of Commons.

I know the Minister wants to do all she can, and I know the Government want to do all they can, but I honestly believe that we all have to wake up. We all have to say this really cannot continue. After this debate, people out there expect to be able to see something being done. Early intervention, schooling and parenting matter, and all of that is right, but what are we going to do now?

My hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) talked about the long summer evenings. A young person was stabbed to death in Islington at 6.30 pm last night. It was not down some murky alleyway at 1 o'clock in the morning; it was on the streets of Islington in front of people going about their everyday business. This cannot be acceptable, and it cannot be right.

I passionately argue for us not only to debate the issue and not only to show to the people out there who might be watching that we care—I think everybody does care—but to show that we get it and that we understand it. We must tell the mothers, the families and the communities across this country who are crying that we will stand with them and do something about it.

I was a Home Office Minister when we were faced with some of these problems before and it is a sterile argument. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington has argued about police numbers. She has not said that that is the only solution—nobody on either side of the House has said it is the only solution. Of course it is also about youth services. The best people to get involved are the reformed gang members. Get the people in who understand what is going on. Get them in to talk about it—once they have been subject to the law, I hasten to add.

I want to make two more points. This is from the Government's own evidence. We can see this in the documentation that the Government have published in their serious violence strategy. It totally vindicates what my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington has said: targeted stop-and-search is absolutely a part of what we should do, but there is no evidence, even from the Government in their serious violence strategy, that blanket stop-and-search makes any difference. It is in the document the Government have published. What is crucial, it says—I know this as a teacher who dealt with fairly minor instances—is that there is certainty of a consequence. The strategy states:

“We also know that the certainty of punishment is likely to have a greater impact than its severity.”

That is the Government's own evidence. People have to know that they cannot just act with impunity—

Lyn Brown: Because they are going to get caught.

Vernon Coaker: Exactly. They have to know they will get caught and be held responsible for what they have done, be it carrying a knife, smashing a window, swearing at somebody or acting in a racist way. If they do not

know they will get caught, it is like a kid at school, or your own son or daughter: they will mess you about, but in a much more serious way. So we need certainty of punishment. The Minister has to get hold of the Ministry of Justice, or whoever is responsible, and say, “Get it sorted out. We are the Government.” We are the Parliament. If we cannot sort it out, who is going to sort it out?

We have heard the argument about police numbers. Of course police numbers are not the only reason for this situation, but policing makes a big difference and police numbers make a big difference. It is obvious. Do not accept what my colleagues have been saying; the Government's own serious violence strategy says exactly that. It says the fall in police numbers is partly a driver—not the only driver, as I totally accept—for the rise in serious violence.

I will finish with this in order to keep to the 10-minute limit. I wish to make one plea to the Minister. This is what I want to happen in the short term. The longer term will sort itself out, but the communities I represent in Nottinghamshire—in Nottingham and around there—and those represented by other Members need something to hold on to now. So I say to the Minister: go to the Treasury and demand, to deal with a national emergency, a pot of money that will allow hotspots to be identified across the country, where police resources can be targeted. That is what works, according to what the Government themselves say: putting money into hotspot areas, so that the police can increase their resources, target those resources and work with youth services and with the community, brings down crime. Crucially, again according to the Government's own evidence, not only does it bring down crime—it does not result in a displacement of crime from one area to another. Would that not be a price worth paying, Minister? Would that bill not be worth the Government's picking up? We are talking about a bill of tens of millions of pounds to give to the hotspot areas in London and around the rest of the country where we know the majority of these offences occur. What a statement it would be to those communities to say to them, “We are going to provide some additional resources for the police you need, and to support the youth services in the community alongside them, in order to target what we now accept is a national emergency and a national crisis.”

5.44 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): On Friday, I will attend the funeral of Tanesha Melbourne-Blake, who was shot dead at the age of 17 in my constituency on Easter bank holiday Monday. It was her death that triggered a national conversation about why 67 young people have lost their lives in our capital city. It is important to say that many of those young people who have lost their lives are black-British in their description. It is also important to say that this debate must, as it already has done, quite properly land on the issue of whether in fact black lives matter in this country. It is sad and depressing to have to say that, but all resources should be brought to bear to deal with this problem, and there is a feeling that had 67 young people lost their lives in a leafy shire, much more attention would have been paid.

It is important to say right from the beginning that if any of my three children picked up a knife and took it to another child, I would be absolutely horrified and,

[Mr David Lammy]

frankly, the response that I would have as a father would be tougher than that of the police or the law. Of course these issues come back to parenting and to neighbourhoods, but it is also the case—we get used to it in this Chamber—that some Members have been to the best public schools, and that experience is not only about education, because one way in which those schools achieve all that they achieve is the fact that there is the most fantastic extra-curricular work at the end of the school day. If someone is lucky enough to go to one of our public schools, for that 30 grand a year, the rugby, cricket, football, drama and swimming are tremendous. It has always surprised me that some of those very same Members—not all, but some of them—do not realise that a black child in my constituency deserves exactly the same after school. If the Government cut local authorities in the way that we have seen, so that there cannot be the sport or youth services, how do we support a parent to raise her child?

It is just like a doctor facing a patient and assessing whether the illness in front of him has got worse. Is it about the same, or is it getting better? When we look at youth violence, which has now been with us for well over two decades—certainly for the two decades that I have been a Member of Parliament—we have to ask ourselves whether it is the same, about stable or getting worse. The answer is that it is getting worse. Why is it getting worse and what will the strategy do to deal with the problem?

The central issue, about which we hear so little and which the strategy does not really deal with in depth—we did not hear enough on it from the Minister when he was at the Dispatch Box, either—is the work of the Home Office and the National Crime Agency on serious organised crime and serious gangsters. According to the EU's drugs agency, this country is the drugs capital of Europe. The UN has said that the global drugs market is thriving and London is the capital of the cocaine market in Europe. Some 30 tonnes of cocaine come into our country every year. Our illegal drugs market is worth at least £5.3 billion. The National Crime Agency says that drugs trafficking costs our country £11 billion per year.

The Home Office's own data shows that at least 1 million people in this country have taken cocaine in the past year, so there is a seriously lucrative market. If there is a lucrative market worth billions every year, that is worth fighting, so why are we not hearing more about cutting off these gangs at source and stopping the flow of drugs and firearms into our country? Why has the Border Force been cut by 25%? How is the Border Force to deal with the drugs coming into our country if there are not the personnel to do it? I have been to the National Crime Agency and had briefings from senior officers. They are being asked to do more with less. They are being asked to deal with cyber-crime; they are being asked to deal with terrorism; and they are being asked to deal with child sexual exploitation and many other issues. They are not being told that drugs are a priority. We have not had any statements from this Home Office on drugs policy. Many people think that the war on drugs has failed, but we have had nothing to replace it, and because we have had nothing to replace it, there is a growing market. Foot soldiers in my constituency and others are being recruited to feed the demand that exists across our country.

In the serious violence strategy, there are no new announcements on organised crime. In the summary on the Government's website, there is no mention of organised crime. In the four themes of the serious violence strategy, there is no mention of organised crime. When we read the strategy, we find out that, apparently, there is "ongoing" work to tackle serious and organised crime, thanks to the 2017 drugs strategy that has promised to "restrict supply" by criminal gangs, "disrupt domestic drugs markets", "respond effectively to the threat posed by organised crime groups" and make our borders "more resilient". Well, it is not working.

The strategy is linked to ongoing work on serious and organised crime, but there is not just a link; the two issues are the same. Serious organised crime drives violence, so we cannot have a serious violence strategy without a strategy to deal with serious organised crime. It could get worse. The National Crime Agency has been clear that eastern European organised groups are bringing guns into this country. It is worried that they are actually beginning to supply some people with grenades—grenades! You heard it here first in Parliament. When will we get serious about this? When will a grenade go off to protect a county line?

The Government strategy recognises the following fact:

"Serious violence, drugs and profits are closely linked. Violence can be used as a way of maintaining and increasing profits within the drugs markets."

The Government's own strategy tells us that the share of homicides that are explicitly linked to drugs stands at 57%, yet, again, there is nothing new here on organised crime.

I have been passed a document by the Metropolitan police showing that half of the homicides that we saw in the capital last year were linked directly to gang activities and turf wars, but we are hearing very little about breaking that cycle—that cycle of protect and serve to sell drugs—and the myriad organisations that sit well above the youth crime on the ground.

Let me put this bluntly. Very, very sadly, because of poverty and a lot of the issues in many of our constituencies, recruiting young people is much easier than it should be. We have to cut off the demand for the drugs that they are selling and the violence that it is driving in communities such as mine.

This document is not a strategy; it is a wish list full of jargon. It is not sufficient—not even close. Let us look at the key actions and commitments. They include to undertake "nationwide awareness-raising communication activity" and provide £175,000 to deliver support to children at risk in schools and pupil referral units. The Home Office is apparently to provide £1 million to help communities tackle knife crime and provide £500,000 for a new round of heroin and crack action areas. Am I really supposed to believe that if 50 or 60 white middle-class young people were killed in Surrey or Kent in space of five months, we would just have an "awareness-raising communication activity"?

If innocent children were being gunned down on the streets of Richmond or Guildford, would we have a £175,000 fund to deliver support to at-risk children? A person cannot buy a house in London for £175,000, and that is what we are spending on at-risk children. Really? It is not good enough. Of course Ministers have been quick to celebrate the £11 million early intervention youth fund, but what will that fund deliver when in my

borough alone—the London borough of Haringey—the local authority has had to cut £160 million since 2010, when funding has fallen by almost 50%, and when there has been a 45% cut in staff? Unison has calculated that youth services have been cut by almost half. Will that £11 million meet the gap? Really? The Mayor is putting in a fund of £40 million, but that will not meet the gap and, going back to what I said originally, it gets us nowhere near the extra-curricular activities that some young people in our country who go to certain schools get, when the poorest young people who need as much, if not more, are getting less.

It takes a village to raise a child. No parents or single mother can do it on their own. My wife and I certainly do not do it on our own, but we have the resources to pay for help and to bus our kids all over London to activities. Why should people on the poorest housing estates in London not have the same thing? The response is not good enough when all that the Government and the Met Commissioner want to talk about is stop-and-search or YouTube. Those two things are important, but they are not the only issues.

James Cleverly *rose*—

Mr Lammy: Given the time, I will not give way.

When asked why crime had risen, the Met Commissioner said, “We think that stop-and-search has had some bearing on this.” Let us not have another argument about the merits of stop-and-search when we reached cross-party consensus on it under the current Prime Minister. We should of course bring in intelligence-led stop-and-search where there has been a spike in crime, but that will not deal with huge amounts of cocaine or stop the death of Tanesha, who was shot in the chest. This is not about stop-and-search. Yes, we must challenge YouTube, and we have to get the drill music videos down, but if the unemployment rate in a constituency such as mine is between 40% and 50% for some young black men—they have no work—it is unsurprising that they rely on putting drill music videos online to get a little money. Why are we surprised? We should get the videos down, but they are almost a distraction, because the real issue is organised crime. I want to hear about “McMafia”, eastern European gangs, Albania and transhipment routes. I want to know why we are cutting the Border Force by 25%.

It is not just gang members getting caught up in all this. There are two other types of young people I care a lot about, because I was them once. A second group of young people are picking up knives on our estates. Why? They are picking them up because they are shit-scared. I was once one of those young people, and I am so lucky that I had things to distract me, but they are scared. We in this House have failed and the Met has failed as a police force if those young people are scared on their estates. That is why they are picking up knives. It is not because they are gang members. They are hiding knives in bushes on the way to school and then finding them on Saturdays and Sundays because they are scared. We will have failed and the Minister will have failed if we do not make them feel safe.

The third kind of young person are those who are dyslexic or have ADHD. They are not going to get access to medication, and there will be no access to CAMHS in the constituencies that we are talking about—it is not going to happen for months—so those young

people are seduced into following the crowd. They get seduced by the videos, end up in a group, get arrested on joint enterprise and then go to prison. What are we going to do about that growing number?

Those two groups need a proper strategy—a much better strategy than this. I look forward to working with the Government on their serious violence strategy, because if we do not solve this problem, the figure will be over 100 by the autumn. You heard it here first. Over 100 young people—more than New York—will have died in this country. Do black lives matter or not? That is the question for the Minister.

5.58 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow two deeply moving and powerful contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). They are absolutely right to be angry.

Last weekend, a 16-year-old boy from my constituency, Ozell Pemberton, bled to death on the streets of Sutton Coldfield after he was stabbed. His mother is absolutely distraught. He is the latest casualty of the rise in violent crime, which has doubled since 2013, with knife crime up by 36%.

In my constituency and in many parts of Birmingham, fear stalks the streets. It has been said many times in this debate that this not just about police numbers—I will come to that later—but I say in all earnestness to the Minister that she cannot cut 21,000 police officers nationwide, including 2,100 in the west midlands, and expect there to be no consequences. Cressida Dick was absolutely right when she made the link between reduced police numbers and rising crime. To be absolutely frank, the Government are in denial. There is a simple, blunt reality: more people will die who might otherwise have lived if we do not reverse this deeply damaging policy of the biggest cuts to any police service in western Europe.

What is happening on our streets is truly frightening, affecting young people but not only young people. We recently had a public meeting in my constituency, following a litany of stabbings and shootings in the preceding three months: two men stabbed in Tyburn Road; guns going off in Gravelly Lane; a robbery in the Greggs store on Kingsbury road involving a two-foot-long machete; shootings in Dovedale Road; two men stabbed on Edgware Road; and a gang of 30 men with machetes attacking a local shop on Witton Lodge Road. Only last month, three sixth-formers from St Edmund Campion School were standing at the bus stop outside their school, when they were attacked by two men with machetes. One boy had his armed chopped from his shoulder down to his wrist.

It is not just about the young people who are directly affected. Fear is being generated by growing gang crime and gangs on the streets. A 60-year-old woman in Slade Road said, “I’ve lived here for 55 years, but I’m now afraid to leave my home.” A woman who has lived on the Perry Common estate for 48 years said, “I don’t go out after dark.” Young men are saying to me, “We are afraid to go outside of our estates.” One young man is even afraid to go to school unless he is escorted, because of the risk of becoming a victim of gang crime.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and other speakers have catalogued why this is happening. It is despair; there is often no

[Jack Dromey]

hope of getting a decent job. It is deprivation. It is mental ill health; my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham was absolutely right about access to CAMHS for those struggling with forms of mental ill health. It is family breakdown and, sometimes, housing problems. It is also the pernicious influence of the internet providers, which in my view are literally getting away with murder. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham was absolutely right that it is the fear that can drive young people into gangs so that they feel protected against gang violence. Of course, there is also the rapid growth in drug crime and the pernicious county lines strategies of drug dealers. All those issues need to be tackled, and not just by way of additional police numbers.

Let me give an example of what is happening in the west midlands. The police and crime commissioner, David Jamieson, has established a commission on gangs and violence, injecting £2 million into a very welcome initiative that includes: a team of expert negotiators set up to diffuse violence between gangs and to help individuals escape gangs; a mentoring scheme to help young people at risk of offending; a package of support measures to rehabilitate ex-offenders; and a set of programmes designed to provide alternative activities for young people at risk of school exclusion and offending. That is all deeply welcome. We need an integrated, public health approach, as several hon. Members in today's debate have mentioned. But, crucially, such an approach will be limited in its impact without the necessary resources. That is why my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling and my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) were absolutely right that it is crucial to provide adequate resources at the next stages.

Police numbers matter, particularly in the role of neighbourhood policing—the building of relationships with communities. I can give an example of that from my own constituency. Sergeant Simon Hensley set up a canoeing club on Brookvale Park lake, and 200 young people joined it. He helped some of them by way of signposting the various forms of assistance they needed in their lives. When there was an outbreak of burglaries in Stockland Green, young people with whom relationships had been formed came forward and said, “Simon, we think we know who the burglars are.” Some might say, “What are the police doing setting up a canoeing club?”, but it was an excellent way of reaching out to and involving local young people. Sadly, though, such initiatives are becoming ever more difficult because neighbourhood policing has been hollowed out as the numbers of police officers have fallen.

On resources, the Government talk in their strategy about the role of council youth services, family support, mental health services, and schools. In Birmingham, the problem with that is that the council's budget has been cut in half. We have seen the biggest cuts in local government history—£700 million. Youth services have been decimated, family support has been cut back and mental health facilities likewise, and schools are struggling with their budgets. All those things are absolutely vital to underpin a policing response, and the social fabric of the city is increasingly under strain. All the services that are vital in terms of effective early intervention are under pressure.

Of course there are some welcome steps identified in the strategy, but I ask the Minister to listen to the wise

words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham, who said that they are wholly inadequate to rise to the challenge of what is confronting us now in this country, and the wise words of my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling, who said that this is a national emergency. These are young people—the best of our country who are being cut down in their prime. It is fundamentally wrong, and the Government have to rise to that challenge.

6.6 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), who speaks with great knowledge on this subject. I have been pleased to work with him in the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime.

I speak as the chair of the all-party group but also as the Member of Parliament for Croydon Central, where we have had a significant issue with knife crime, as have many other places across London and across the country. I want to respond, although he is not in his seat, to the hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly), who questioned the conversation we were having in this debate about whether we care or not. I do not think it is an issue of whether we care but of whether we care enough. I do not doubt the Government's compassion on this issue, but I do doubt the choices they have made about what we care about more. It is the Government's role to prioritise, and this issue is not prioritised enough.

Most of the debate so far has been very good, and we have recognised most of the issues at play. We know that this is partly about policing and partly about prevention. Those issues have been rehearsed and I do not need to go over them again. I just want to make one small point to add to the overall picture: it is not just the individuals involved who are suffering deeply as a result of this violence, but the families and communities. I have in my constituency the family of a boy who was murdered. The boy's brother, following the murder of his brother, got into trouble at school. There started to be issues, and the school was looking at whether it should perhaps expel him. He then got access to some mental health treatment. It transpired that this boy had very severe post-traumatic stress disorder and needed counselling. We then had to go on the CAMHS waiting list for the treatment that he needed. It took months for him to get that treatment, and who knows what damage will have been done in the interim? It is not just about the individuals, but their families, communities and schools that are also suffering.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) on her repeated requests for a debate on this subject, not least in asking the Leader of the House every Thursday morning for many, many weeks. She has done well to get a debate. As many others have said, it is a great shame that it has been so long in coming. We should have had a proper debate, with the Home Secretary, as soon as the strategy was published, and that has not happened.

Before the publication of the strategy, I, along with 12 other chairs of cross-party groups from both sides of the House, wrote to the then Home Secretary to call for a clear and ambitious target to halve the number of deaths from youth violence over the next 10 years. We were disappointed that the Government chose to ignore that call and not to set themselves any kind of goal, but given the resources they have put in place, that is not

surprising, because the resources are simply not enough to achieve a target. The Government talk of a different approach, focusing on early intervention, but those are frankly just words; we need more action.

I want to make one main point that will hopefully add to the debate. I think we all agree that this is a very serious issue that we need to do something about. Everybody is talking about how the public health response can help. I want to mention my friend and former boss, Tessa Jowell, whom we lost recently to brain cancer. I want to pay tribute to her trailblazing work in this area, as the first Minister for Public Health. Almost 20 years before public health became part of our discourse around this agenda, Tessa was putting in place a strategy that was called by one commentator “the success story of our time”, and there are strong lessons to learn from it.

The teenage pregnancy strategy is an example of the sort of long-term, integrated public health approach that we so desperately need now to tackle knife crime and violent crime. It was an evidence-based programme. It had a 10-year goal, it had funding and it had leadership. The strategy did not simply attempt to crack down on teenage pregnancy but sought to understand and prevent its underlying causes. There were tough national targets, but there were local strategies. There was a central team in Government—that was key—who co-ordinated the response across Government. The Prime Minister took a keen interest in the strategy and was regularly given reports on progress, and it was taken seriously. It was not just about telling girls not to have sex; it was about the underlying issues of aspiration, jobs, training and support.

That strategy succeeded. It halved teenage pregnancy rates and is now used as a blueprint by the World Health Organisation. Speaking in this place 20 years ago, Tessa Jowell criticised

“the rather pathetic hand wringing about moral decay that characterised so much of the debate about teenage pregnancy in the past.”—[*Official Report*, 23 June 1999; Vol. 333, c. 1127.]

Sadly, the debate about knife crime remains full of hand wringing about moral decay, with not enough focus on the social conditions that underpin it. Of course offenders must be caught and punished, and the police without any doubt need more resources to do their job, but every single police officer will tell you that we cannot arrest our way out of this problem.

We know what a lot of the answers are. We just need to have the will. At the moment, the Government are not showing that they have the will. I think everybody on both sides of the House would work with them, if only they would publish a proper strategy, with proper resources, focused on prevention.

6.12 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Twenty-two years ago, I was up in the Gallery watching proceedings on the Family Law Act 1996. It was the first time I had ever been in this place, and I watched Members on both sides of the House debate fiercely, furiously and passionately, just as we have this afternoon. I also watched Members find common ground where they could. I watched a Government who moved when they realised that the arguments had been well put by Opposition Members, and I watched an Act come into being that helped save thousands, if not millions, of lives through reforming the law on domestic violence.

Although domestic violence is not the subject of the serious violence strategy, I want to mention it. The strategy quite rightly says that it does not address topics where other strategies are already in existence, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) reminds us every International Women’s Day, two women a week are still being killed by a violent partner, and there are lessons to learn for this strategy from the way we tackle domestic violence.

I am not going to repeat what others have said. I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) for working so hard on securing this important debate and for what she is doing on the Youth Violence Commission, which could be transformational and could well reflect what my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) said about a long-term strategy that looks at underlying causes and does not just go for quick fixes.

While we are talking about long-term strategies and not just going for quick fixes, one of my main asks of Ministers—both of them are now in their places—is that we look at the benefits that could accrue from implementing, early and well, compulsory personal, social and health and economic education, with sex and relationships education, for all children, whatever their background and wherever they are at school. This is not me as a Labour MP asking for more money, although I have that on my list as well, but me asking for something that could have a transformational effect.

We have learned from work on perpetrator programmes in the domestic violence sector. I know that the Minister is very interested in this, because she and I have conversed about it many times, and I value her support. We have learned from work on domestic violence perpetrator programmes what can be done if we invest long term in helping to change people’s underlying belief systems. She will have heard me say this before, but I will say it again. In my time, I worked with many very violent men before I entered this place, and if only there had been some form of early intervention for them 20 or 30 years previously, perhaps they would never have been forced to end up in prison and subsequently in a room with 16 other men while I and my co-facilitator told them what they needed to do differently. I really wish that we did not need domestic violence perpetrator programmes after people have already committed violence, but if we have investment in high-quality PSHE at an early stage, we can do so much to tackle the things so many hon. Members have mentioned.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) said that young people think someone is their friend when they offer them chicken and chips. I have to say that a high-quality sex and relationships education and PSHE curriculum can help young people differentiate between someone who is a friend and someone who is trying to buy their favour.

The question of gender has not been mentioned, but I want to raise it. It is often controversial, but it is deeply relevant. Member after Member has mentioned people who have been killed, but behind those stories lie the people who have killed, and they are often—they are usually—male. Let us be honest about this: if we look at the statistics for murder and serious violence, it is often, although not always, men who commit those crimes. It is not just an accident that they are men; they are doing it in a culture of patriarchy and with attitudes

[Thangam Debbonaire]

towards gender roles that support them in thinking that they can get away with something, or that they are entitled to or should do something because they are a man. This is something else that could be challenged for the benefit of all men, as well as for women. It is for the benefit of all men to know that being violent does not define them as a man, and that trying to control someone else or to use a knife or a gun does not make them a better man. Again, I ask the Minister, in her summing up, to give us an update about where we are with PSHE, because we could explore that and make it available to all young people as part of the long-term strategy mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central.

My friends in the Avon and Somerset police force are doing amazing work, but I have to bring in the question of police cuts before I finish. Since 2010—not just since 2015, but since 2010—the Avon and Somerset area has had £65 million of police cuts, and we have lost 655 officers. They were good, specialist officers, and we have lost specialist services that knew how to tackle specific issues. We have lost them, and some of them will never come back. When I went on a ride-along recently with PC Ben Spence and Sergeant Richard Jones—thank you to them both—they showed me the impact of the cuts by introducing me to people who are being cuckooed. They are very vulnerable people, some of whom have criminal records but some of whom do not, and both categories deserve our help. The impact of cuckooing is that other people are being hurt and other people's lives are being made a misery.

I wish to leave the Minister with a final picture. This affects ordinary people in my constituency, and I am sure in hers as well. I know her constituency well, having visited it many times. I do not think there are the tower blocks in Louth and Horncastle that we have in Bristol West—she will correct me if I am wrong—but there will be similar issues and commonalities. The people who live in the tower blocks right outside my office tell me of the misery of knowing that someone in their block is being cuckooed: being terrified at someone ringing on the doorbell late at night, being old and feeling frightened of the drug dealer at their door, seeing someone inject heroin into their groin on the stairwell, or not being able to send their children out to play in the park right outside. It is so heartbreaking.

I am sure that the Minister would not want that for anybody's constituents. I believe that she is honourable, and she, like me, will want all those young people to have a better life. I offer her this opportunity: I will work with her and contribute my experience of domestic violence work and work with violent men. I will help anybody interested in learning from that experience. But I ask the Minister to commit tonight to making sure that PSHE comes forward at the earliest opportunity. Also, will she please at least talk to her Treasury colleagues about funding for our specialist police officers?

6.19 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire). I want to participate in this debate principally to talk about some of the shockingly violent crimes that Great Grimsby and North

East Lincolnshire have experienced in recent months, and to explore a bit more broadly the situation there to try to get to the bottom of what seems to be a spike. In Humberside, violent and sexual crime has increased by 20%. Arguments have been made that police numbers are not the only story, but there is an issue about referrals as well: while sexual crime seems to be going up, referrals to the Crown Prosecution Service across the country are going down.

I want to focus on violence and drugs. I have previously mentioned in the House the gang of hooligans who went marauding through my lovely seaside town, frightening the life out of many of my constituents. A poor man was killed by a single punch. Another man, Anthony Richardson, who was homeless, was killed in a daylight attack. Bins have been set on fire against vulnerable people's homes, resulting in their deaths. This week, a knife was pulled on a child at a BMX track by another child.

These incidents may not be as regular or serious as those that some Members have discussed this afternoon, but they are serious and they have a lasting impact on my community. The incidents are separated by time, and I certainly do not want to paint my town as being riddled with violent crime. But this is certainly becoming an issue. In a small town and small borough such as North East Lincolnshire, the impact on the impression people have of the area can be lasting. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) talked about fear and the perception of crime, and that issue is incredibly important to many of my constituents.

In March this year, 626 violent crimes were recorded in my area. The figure has never been that high; I have looked at the figures back to 2011. The statistic does not distinguish between domestic violence and other violent crime, but I do not think that matters a great deal. I feel that the violent crime is linked to drugs. The Government's strategy refers to crack cocaine as an issue, but the biggest issue on the streets of North East Lincolnshire seems to be Spice. Its effects are so varied and users do not really know where they are or what they are doing. The local outreach service Harbour Place notes that it is the most destructive drug it has seen on the streets of Great Grimsby.

It is interesting that the drug crime does not seem to have risen as the violent crime has. Is there an issue with drugs not being tackled early enough, so that serious violence increases? If more action were taken to deal with the drugs element, perhaps violent crime would not be happening as it is.

I do not know whether these are reported issues of drug use, incidents or charges, and perhaps some of the detail is hidden, but I am left concerned that violent drug criminals are not being apprehended despite the determination of Humberside police through Operation Impact, which has tried to deal with the issue. Grimsby is known to be at the receiving end of county lines action taking place at the moment. That police involvement seems to have been solely around engaging in that county lines operation to try to stem the flow of drugs. Colleagues this afternoon have mentioned trying to stop the big dealers from spreading drugs around the country by orchestrating efforts towards smaller local areas.

Constituents say to me that it is all well and good looking at the big picture and stopping the big fish in their tracks, but the impact that has at the local level means that the police do not have the resources to

intervene on drug taking at the local street level. That has an impact on neighbourhoods. A comment was made about people injecting heroin in a stairwell. They are lucky in Bristol West to have the privacy of a stairwell. I have witnessed it happening openly in the middle of the street in my constituency and it puts people in fear. It makes them feel like the police are not intervening to stop that action from taking place. It makes them feel that there is nobody who has the power or the responsibility to stop it happening right in front of our noses. If I am seeing it and my constituents are seeing it, they wonder why nobody in authority is seeing it and stepping in to stop it from happening.

This issue does not just affect the difficult estates and other areas with greater social deprivation. Recently, I received reports of drugs being dealt from nice middle-class homes in quiet areas where the police usually have little cause to go. The criminals consider those areas to be police blind spots. As I said, the attention given to tackling the source of the drugs has had a real impact on the local community. People feel very frightened in their neighbourhoods.

In Humberside, there are 800 fewer police and police staff than in 2010. There has been excellent work by Labour's police and crime commissioner, who recognises these issues. The chief constable has also heard my concerns about the need for a dual strategy, tackling the issue at the level of criminal gangs and dealing with the impact on people's streets and homes. The Humberside PCC Keith Hunter recognises those issues and rather than sitting on millions of pounds in reserves, as his predecessor did, he has decided to plough them back into shoring up staffing numbers, including the recent recruitment of 200 new officers. I applaud him for that, but we have to remember that reserves can only be spent once. We need to ensure sustainability in that programme. I ask the Minister to take the opportunity to have a look at that sustainability.

I should take a moment to thank Humberside police for a genuine determination in wanting to tackle the root cause of extreme violence linked to drugs. They have, at every request I have put to them to help be a part of community solutions, given up their resources to help. Their help is not always just dealing with crime directly. Recently, a police community support officer in the Freshney ward found an elderly gentleman who had been hit by his own garage door and left unconscious on the floor. I do not know how long he had been there, but the fact that we have PCSOs who are grounded in the community and walking the beat meant that they were able to see that man and help to get him to hospital. That shows the importance of neighbourhood policing more broadly. Boots on the ground give local communities the confidence that their police are aware of the issues, however innocent and minor or serious they might be.

The police have to tackle crime gangs who are ever more inventive at operating through young people, and not just the young people I expected. In a meeting with the police last week, I was talking about vulnerable children being exploited. I was thinking about disadvantaged, marginalised and look-after children, but I was told that the young people now being targeted by gangs are those who are well dressed and look respectable. They are completely unassuming and the police would never think to stop them or suspect that they were involved in

criminal activity. The police need the opportunity to provide resource into the intelligence-led work that other colleagues have talked about.

I finish on the point that activity with young people, and access to youth clubs and to youth activity, are so important. In North East Lincolnshire, all but one youth club has shut in the last eight years, and that youth club, the Shalom centre, which is run by Canon John Ellis, has been under threat of closure. It has had to turn to crowdfunding to try to source an essential £40,000 to stay open. The centre is in one of the most deprived wards. It has managed to raise £15,000 so far, which is absolutely fantastic, and I congratulate and commend him on his efforts. Another community group, Grimsby Boxing Academy, led by Andy Cox, is reopening the Trin youth club in Cleethorpes, thanks to North East Lincolnshire Council allowing it to take that property on for a peppercorn rent. I also mention the CatZero and CPO—Creating Positive Opportunity—Full Families programme, which I know the Minister is aware of, and which works to stay in touch with families who need assistance, help and support more broadly.

The picture clearly differs across the country, but all those communities are experiencing difficulties, fear, hurt and concern. The Minister has to be absolutely sure that her strategy is the right one for tackling that whole variety of different issues.

6.31 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I begin my remarks by marking the first anniversary of the terrible events in Manchester on 22 May 2017. We remember all those who lost their lives and those who were injured. We think of their friends and families and pay tribute to the emergency services and first responders for the work that they did that night. I also pay tribute to the great city of Manchester for the way in which it came together in the aftermath of that awful tragedy.

We are here today to debate the serious violence strategy. There is agreement across the House on its broad themes—tackling county lines, early intervention and prevention, supporting communities and effective law enforcement and criminal justice response. The 14 speeches from Back Benchers covered a range of issues. I draw attention, in particular, to the speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), who has called tirelessly for this debate and spoke movingly about the young lives lost in her constituency and the importance of engaging with young people. After all, they are our country's future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) was absolutely right to draw attention to the comments of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, who said clearly that it would be “naive” to say that the reductions in police finances, whether in London or beyond, have not had an impact. I say to Ministers that her words really should be heeded in terms of how they take matters forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) spoke very movingly about those lost in her constituency and paid tribute, entirely appropriately, to the work by our national health service, whenever there are violent crimes, in seeking to save and treat people. My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) spoke with great passion about the need for action. In a sense, he summed up that urgency in seven words—“what

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are we going to do now?” My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) also spoke with great passion. Like him, I have visited the National Crime Agency, and he is entirely right to draw attention not only to the key issue of tackling serious and organised crime in drugs and firearms, but to the cuts to Border Force.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) was entirely right to say that 21,000 police officers cannot be cut with no consequences. The Government should not be in denial about that. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) spoke very movingly and appropriately about the work of the late Baroness Jowell in public health. She is absolutely right that we should bring that into the debate. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s work as the chair of all-party group on knife crime.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) was entirely right to bring domestic violence into this debate—a key issue on which she spoke with great authority—and my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) spoke well about the shocking rise in violent crime in her area. She also raised the key issue of why there had been a reduction in the number of referrals for sexual offences from the police to the Crown Prosecution Service. That is something that needs to be considered across Government.

The issue of resources has been raised across the Chamber. Let me say at the outset: I am not saying that adequate resourcing is sufficient on its own to tackle these multifaceted issues, but it is necessary if we are to take all the action needed. It cannot be said that police numbers are irrelevant. If there is any doubt about that, I should remind the House of the leaked Home Office document that appeared last month, which my right hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary spoke of. Let us be clear—this is what the Home Office is saying to Ministers:

“Since 2012-13, weighted crime demand on the police has risen, largely due to growth in recorded sex offences. At the same time officers’ numbers have fallen by 5% since 2014. So resources dedicated to serious violence have come under pressure and charge rates have dropped. This may have encouraged offenders.” Home Office Ministers should be heeding the advice they are being given.

We have spoken a great deal in the House today about the 21,000 fewer police officers, but we must not forget either that more than 18,000 police support staff have been cut, in addition to more than 6,000 police community support officers. The statistics really are damning. My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson), who served with such great distinction in the Home Office, highlighted the figures on violent offending for the year ending December 2017. As he pointed out, there were just under 1.35 million violent offences that year compared with 700,000 in 2009—a near doubling. The Government’s own serious violence strategy also contains some very sobering but pretty clear statistics: the homicide rate rose from 553 in 2011-12 to 628 in 2016-17; knife crime offences were up, from just over 28,000 in 2011-12 to more than 32,000 in 2016-17; firearms offences increased over the same period from just over 6,000 to 6,375 and increased by 31% between 2013-14 and 2016-17. These figures only reinforce my hon. Friends’ points about the urgent need to tackle this and save lives.

I go back to what the Prime Minister said when she became Home Secretary in 2010:

“Nobody should accept a situation where at least 26,000 people fall victim to crime every day.”

I have looked at the crime survey for England and Wales. In the year ending September 2017, there were more than 10.5 million recorded criminal incidents, which works out at over 29,000 per day—3,000 more per day than in 2010. If the Prime Minister tells us that that was unacceptable in 2010, why on earth should we accept it in 2018?

Those statistics really should make the Government think, but this is about far more than mere statistics. Every statistic I have quoted is about young lives being spoilt or endangered, young lives crying out for intervention.

I say to Ministers, “Do not dismiss the impact of police numbers.” The Metropolitan Police Commissioner makes the link with finances; the leaked Home Office document makes the link; common sense makes the link. Let me say to all Conservative Members who have spoken today that nowhere in the serious violence strategy document is there any sustained analysis of the link between police numbers and levels of crime, and indeed violent crime; it is simply not there. If there were such confidence, the analysis could have been put in that document and placed before the House, but it is not there because we all know that there is a link.

I say to the Government, “Listen to what has been said in the debate today, and act, so that we can save more young lives.”

6.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Let me begin by saying that Manchester is a city that is very close to my heart. I grew up in Lancashire, and it was the big city that we used to visit on a Saturday to do our shopping, go to the cinema and go to concerts. I know that, across the House, we share the sorrow of the people of Manchester. We are in awe of their strength, and we give thanks for the extraordinary bravery of the emergency services and all the members of the public who ran towards danger on that terrible night to help others. Manchester is a magnificent city with great people, and their response on that night is a mark of how great its community is.

Let me now turn to the very serious debate that we have had today. I am pleased that it was called for by Members across the House, and, as a Minister, I am pleased that the Government provided time for it, because the topic is so serious. We have heard from colleagues on both sides of the House about the way in which it has affected their constituents personally. I will begin my response by identifying a couple of points on which I hope we can all agree.

One point on which I hope we can all agree is that we all want this to stop. Another is that we owe it to our constituents, to the victims of serious violence and to the families who are grieving, to put aside party politics and work together to stop it. That point was made forcefully and powerfully by the hon. Members for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and for West Ham (Lyn Brown), and also by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes). His speech showed that—contrary to suggestions made by one or two Members—even colleagues with constituents in rural counties a million miles from the urban hotspots can feel powerfully about this issue, and care about it.

I am very pleased that the Mayor of London and Members on both sides of the House—including the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna)—as well as police and crime commissioners, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, the director general of the National Crime Agency, people who head charities, local government representatives and Ministers across the Government are joining those in the serious violence taskforce to implement the more than 60 commitments in the serious violence strategy. At the first meeting of the taskforce last month, the firm intention of everyone was to act. It is not a talking shop but a place for action, and it is gratifying that—I sense—such an approach has the support of the House today.

The most important part of my role as the Minister responsible for crime, safeguarding and vulnerability is meeting and listening to the victims of crime and grieving families. I am constantly amazed at the strength and dignity of people who are in the most trying of circumstances. It does not matter whether the incident happened a few months ago or years ago; the impact on those families is still painful to behold. I know that Members in all parts of the House have seen it for themselves in their constituencies.

It is a privilege to sit and listen to the families' stories, to hear about their loved ones and to reflect on their views as to what more can, and must, be done. Indeed, some are somehow able to find the wherewithal to use their experiences to help others. I am thinking in particular of Ben Kinsella's family. The pain the parents have felt over the years since Ben's death is palpable, yet the family have put that emotional energy into setting up the Ben Kinsella Trust centre in Finsbury, which I cannot recommend highly enough to Members to visit. It is particularly effective at addressing themes that have been raised today, such as reaching out to young people from primary school age through to late teens in an age-appropriate manner. I will not give away the impact of a visit, but the most powerful part is where the horrendous impact of such murders on family members and the friends of those lost is made very clear. That is a theme that has been raised by colleagues across the House today; the effect of these murders is not restricted to the family unit but is also felt by friends and communities.

I thank every Member who has spoken today, particularly those who spoke so movingly of the experience in their constituencies. I am bound to mention the contribution made by the hon. Member for West Ham, whose constituency, sadly, features too often in our conversations in this regard. When talking about one victim, she used a phrase that struck me: "His father's heart broke in my arms." That sums up the feeling hon. Members have brought into the Chamber this afternoon and points to the much wider impact this has had nationally.

It is vital that we listen to the young people themselves. I agree completely with colleagues across the House who have said that, and it is why I and other Ministers visit charities across the country to listen to young people and the people who work with them; I am sure not every teenager wishes to spend their afternoon off school receiving a visit from a Home Office Minister, but certainly their youth workers do appreciate the chance to talk to us.

I visited Safer London in east London and I was so inspired by a video it showed me of one of the young people it had worked with, Reuben, that I invited him,

other former gang members and members of the charity into the House of Commons. I hope colleagues will recall that I invited everyone across the House to come a couple of months ago to the event we held on the Terrace. It is important that young people are not only listened to but feel they are being listened to. It is important to hear from young people such as Reuben, who might live just a few miles down the river; I asked him if he or his friends had ever been to this part of town or to the House of Commons, knowing what the answer was likely to be, and he said that it felt like a different country and it was inconceivable that they would make that journey. This is the first of what I hope will be regular events where colleagues across the House can listen to young people here, to understand for themselves what we should be doing and what more they expect of us.

This reaching out and listening is exactly what Home Office officials did when commissioned by the then Home Secretary a year ago to draw together a strategy to deal with serious violence, because they could see the way the statistics were going. Home Office officials have reached out to the police, local authorities, charities, youth workers, teachers and healthcare providers to ask for their ideas and thoughts on what can be done to stem this flow of violence.

The serious violence strategy that has been published, which hon. Members have been kind enough to review and give their thoughts on today, has four pillars. We are looking not just at law enforcement, important though that is, but at the causes of serious violence and what can be done to tackle it. That is why we are committing £40 million to be invested to support initiatives to tackle serious violence. This will focus on early intervention and prevention and on the root causes of the violence. It will look to help young people before they go down the wrong path, encouraging them to make positive choices and to live productive lives away from violence. It will tackle head on some of the theories about why these crimes occur, and explore the reasons behind the violence, including the links to drugs and gangs.

Melanie Onn: I thank the Minister for giving way, because I forgot to mention something in my speech. Two years ago, I asked a question about Grimsby being included in a list of local authority areas that would benefit from the strategy discussed in the "Ending gang violence and exploitation" paper. Can she tell us what has happened to that paper and that strategy?

Victoria Atkins: I can certainly help the hon. Lady with the "Ending gang violence and exploitation" strategy. It is one of the strategies on which the serious violence strategy has been built. I do not pretend that we are inventing the wheel for the first time here; we are building on work that has been done over the years, and "Ending gang violence and exploitation" is one of those strands of work. We have an inter-ministerial group, and I am delighted to see my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor General, sitting here next to me tonight, because he is one of the Ministers in that group, which I chair. It brings all the relevant Ministers into the room and challenges them to deliver for their Departments in terms of tackling these types of crime. We are now refocusing the group to deal with serious violence, because county lines and other factors have developed. I am hoping that I might get a little assistance specifically

[Victoria Atkins]

about Grimsby, but if I do not, I will write to the hon. Lady about that. I am afraid that I cannot flick through my file and find the answer in time now.

I am delighted—“delighted” is the wrong word; I am pleased—that Members across the House have understood the terrible impact that county lines is having on criminal statistics and on people living day to day in our constituencies. I hope that those who attended the debate on county lines in Westminster Hall several months ago will forgive me for repeating this powerful line from a police officer who has done a lot of work on county lines gangs. She said:

“They are stealing our children.”

That sums it up for me.

The right hon. Member for Tottenham, who I look forward to working with on the serious violence strategy, spoke powerfully about the role of serious organised crime, and I agree with him. I used to prosecute serious organised crime, and I am very alert to it. We would say that county lines is serious organised crime. That is our mindset. It is at the heart of the serious violence document. He made a point about wider serious organised crime groups, and various nationalities have been mentioned today. The National Crime Agency leads on those crime groups and on county lines investigations, because county lines is a national crime. We will also be producing the serious organised crime strategy in due course, in which—believe you me—this will be looked at. Please do not think for a moment that we have ignored serious organised crime; we have not. We have put it at the heart of the strategy, because we consider it to be part of it.

Jack Dromey: There is common ground in the House that this is not just an issue of police numbers, but does the Minister agree with the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick, that there is a link between falling numbers of police officers and rising violent crime?

Victoria Atkins: I am constantly asked that question, as the hon. Gentleman will imagine, and I challenge my officials to tell me the answer, because I want to get to the truth and I want to ensure that we are tackling this as effectively as possible.

During the previous spikes in knife crime in the late 2000s and mid-1990s, there were many, many more officers on the street. In addition, there does not appear to be a relationship between the numbers of police officers and the national rise in serious violence. I absolutely understand why hon. Members on both sides of the House have raised this issue.

Mr John Hayes: My hon. Friend makes a compelling point about the collaboration taking place across Government, and her own work on this is well understood and widely admired. Will she also look at the allocation of police resources and what I described earlier as the police culture? We need policemen who are involved in their communities and who are familiar to and respected by those communities. Such work will build the strength and social solidarity that is essential to tackling the problem.

Victoria Atkins: One of the first challenges that the then Home Secretary, now the Prime Minister, put to the police was to use warranted officers on the frontline

rather than in back-office roles. I am delighted that we have seen police forces rise to the challenge and ensure that more warranted officers are used, as they should be, in frontline policing.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Atkins: If I may, I will make some progress.

I will quickly address funding, which Opposition Members have raised. I do not want to refer back to history but, as my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security and Economic Crime said, we did not introduce these cuts because we wanted to introduce them. The economy was not at all good in 2010 and we had to make some very difficult decisions.

The police and others bore the burden of those restrictions, but since 2015 we have protected police funding. Indeed, this year we are seeing a further £460 million invested in policing, and it will be for police and crime commissioners to spend that money. I am delighted that some police and crime commissioners are looking to increase the number of officers in their forces.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) implored police forces to work more closely together, and we agree, which is why we are providing specific funding of £3.6 million over the next two years to establish a new national county lines co-ordination centre. My hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), who brings his housing expertise to the House, dealt at length with cuckooing, which is an issue that horrifies everyone who has come across it.

The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) has done so much work with her Youth Violence Commission. She argues that having the teachable moment at A&E is too late, and I agree. I also agree with the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) that we need early relationship education, and I am very sympathetic to her calls on that. Indeed, the Department for Education is looking into it with great care. Interestingly, of course, domestic abuse is a theme that runs through members of gangs, which is one reason why I hope we can tie domestic abuse legislation into this important area.

Many colleagues have raised the point about youth services. We understand that, which is why the Government, in partnership with the Big Lottery Fund, have invested £80 million—£40 million in the #iwillFund and £40 million in the youth investment fund. We are also supporting the National Citizen Service and the troubled families programme, and we are setting up the early intervention youth fund. We have the trusted relationships fund and the anti-knife crime community fund. Colleagues on both sides of the House have said that we need funding for small charities, not for the big ones. The anti-knife crime community fund is doing exactly that, and bids are about to open, so please get charities to apply.

I shall turn to the subject of drugs, although I am conscious of the time. Many colleagues have talked about how the journey of cocaine and heroin into this country is plagued with exploitation, violence and death. When someone buys a wrap of cocaine, they have no idea how many children and young people have been involved. We as a House need to unite around precisely that so that when the Government introduce legislation such as the offensive weapons Bill, we will give it full support.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

CONSUMER PROTECTION

That the draft Breaching of Limits on Ticket Sales Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 26 April, be approved.—*(Amanda Milling.)*

Question agreed to.

Fuel Laundering

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Amanda Milling.)

7 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I want to draw the House's attention to a serious problem on a serious scale. It is a problem run by organised crime gangs across our country, yet it appears to many that the Government are lackadaisical or so distracted by other matters that they are not that concerned by it. I want to address the issue of Government concern—they ought to be concerned—as this crime is costing the Treasury hundreds of millions of pounds, so much so that, by a modest calculation, every 10 years the sums the Government could recover would make the Conservative and Democratic Unionist party confidence and supply agreement moneys cost neutral. The Government should consider that when dealing with this issue.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I wish to raise an area of major concern, which is the position of road hauliers, particularly those in Northern Ireland, who are missing out because they are having to compete against those who are dealing in smuggled fuel and are, thus, unable to compete on a level playing field. Most of the moneys being derived from this are going into the pockets of paramilitaries.

Ian Paisley: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. The Government's very conservative estimate of what this crime amounts to is largely down to the lack of resources being directed at tackling it, as measured by the small amount of arrests and convictions, and to the fact that the current Government strategy of markers has failed because the markers do not work as well as the Government pretend. As it is Northern Ireland's problem, it is often regarded as a problem that is out of sight and out of mind. However, the facts available to me indicate that it is fast becoming a UK mainland problem.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that a zero-tolerance approach must be taken to fuel laundering, not simply because of the cost to the Exchequer of some £100 million per annum in Northern Ireland, but because those carrying out these crimes are very often inextricably linked with paramilitarism? We must cut off the money-making arm of paramilitary groups throughout Northern Ireland. Do away with the money and we stop the paramilitary groups being active.

Ian Paisley: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. We hear much debate about Brexit and the hard border, and how it must be frictionless and customs must be harmonised. Every gangster who is engaged in this operation in Northern Ireland and this level of crime, many of whom are senior Sinn Féin supporters and other senior paramilitaries, believes in a hard border on this one, because they love the fact that there is a customs differential and they want to ensure their ability to transfer vast amounts of laundered fuel in a frictionless manner.

Let us examine the scale of the crime. In March, Baroness Neville-Rolfe stated in an answer to questions in the other place that the estimated level of illicit fuel

[*Ian Paisley*]

sales amounts to “£50 million” in lost revenue for the last year for which figures were available. I believe that is a glossed over view and that, even though it is a staggering amount, it conceals a far greater level of fraud. However, if that was the height of it, that is half a billion in resources lost to the Government over the term of a normal Parliament. The most recent official report of the Organised Crime Task Force—I must declare an interest, as I served as a member of it before I joined this House—details that the tax gap between Government known legitimate sales of oils and fuels, and illicit fuel trading is about £100 million, as my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) identified. That has reduced from about £160 million nine years ago, but it is still a staggering amount.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that, in addition to the substantial amounts of money that the Treasury is losing, an issue that is sometimes not highlighted is the danger of the damage done to vehicles? Some of these illicit fuels are poisoned and treated very badly so that these people can maximise profits.

Ian Paisley: If we start to go down that line, the costs are in many ways incalculable. We need to bear that in mind.

The Organised Crime Task Force recounts a case study of an organised crime gang that evaded duty of more than £3 million. It had laundering plants in 13 locations, at one of which the police seized approaching £300,000 in cash. They also seized 72,000 litres of illicit fuel that was being sold to unsuspecting motorists, like my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) said. Nine people were convicted, and two custodial sentences were handed down amounting to—listen to this—just 16 months in prison. Seriously? A multimillion-pound crime gang and they get 16 months in prison. What sort of disincentive to criminality is that?

The Government will no doubt point to their new fuel marker, which they introduced in conjunction with the revenue and customs people in the Republic. They claim that it is particularly special and

“significantly more resistant to laundering”

than old markers. Given that old markers could be laundered through a sieve, that is not actually a good recommendation. They also boast that there has been a “reduction in laundering plants discovered”.

That boast is hollow, as it means that the authorities cannot find the laundering plants.

I will tell the House why that is so. Previously, removal of the marker left an environmentally hazardous sludge that ultimately gave away the launderers’ locations and caused a multimillion-pound hazard that the local authorities had to pay hundreds of thousands pounds to clear up. The new so-called more effective marker can be removed via the process of distillation, leaving no environmental waste at all—it simply evaporates—hence the carefully crafted words of the report. If the laundering plants do not leave any trace, they will be much harder to find, so fewer plants will be discovered. On the fact that the new marker can be distilled off the fuel, I leave this thought with the House: many people in Northern

Ireland know a lot about distillation. They have been distilling a produce in Northern Ireland for very many years, so it is now so much easier to commit this crime than it was previously.

Let me turn to the substance of my argument; I hope that the Minister will respond to these points. This is not a uniquely Irish problem. Because a blind eye has been turned to stamping it out, organised crime gangs are exporting this crime across the Irish sea. A case study produced by the Government’s Organised Crime Task Force recounts how the

“fuels may move across the EU borders without supervision”.

If ever we were going to get a warning that we need more friction on our border in respect of this issue, this must be it.

In 2016, there were 80 movements of ISO tanks—tank containers built to the standard of the International Organisation for Standardisation—containing 26,000 litres each. The Government estimate that millions of litres of this oil were smuggled before it was identified. The crime amounted to millions of pounds in lost revenue for Her Majesty’s Exchequer—and this is just one operator. Such crimes have a devastating impact on our haulage industry, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) said earlier.

At the weekend, three Secretaries of State visited Northern Ireland and heard at first hand from the haulage industry. The industry took the opportunity to spell out the following, saying that organised crime gangs “are now exporting laundered diesel to GB on an industrial scale using bulk containers contained inside curtain slide trailers. This is of huge concern to Roll on Roll off operators on the Irish sea as it is hazardous cargo, is not manifested or transported safely”.

A potential disaster looms that would make the Zeebrugge disaster look insignificant. This operation is being used to supply illicit vehicle operations across England. The Government promise that legitimate trade must not be interfered with or delayed, as a result of Brexit, between our islands and on our island. I agree wholeheartedly with that position, but to have confidence, illicit trade must be stamped out. The Government must not sacrifice their principles on ensuring that we have open trade. They must not allow criminals to get away with it. We must deal with the criminal elements, because they are rubbing their hands in glee, looking at the opportunities that Brexit will open up for them.

There are 5,730 licensed commercial vehicle operators and 22,000 licensed goods vehicles in Northern Ireland. Some 27% of Northern Ireland licences are international hire and reward work compared with an average of 10% here on GB mainland. Therefore, this is big business in Northern Ireland. Some 27,000 people are currently employed in the transport and storage industries in Northern Ireland, and fuel represents about 32% of the operating costs of those industries. It is obvious from those figures that illicit traders can destroy a legitimate business by focusing on the sale of illicit fuel, and put a legitimate operator out of work overnight.

Our duty on fuel is, of course, the highest in Europe and it is unlikely to fall, so the pressure on legitimate trade and the opportunity for the criminal grows. Last month, I met people from the Petrol Retailers Association. They are appalled at how easy laundering has become. They have identified a number of sites across Northern Ireland that are openly run by criminals, and yet nothing

has been done about it. I was going to use privilege this evening to read out the names of 12 illicit trade operators across the United Kingdom that have been given to me by the Petrol Retailers Association. I would get a very easy headline, but I will not do that, because I am not here to embarrass the Government. I am not here to try to pull that one on them, but I do make a plea to the Minister that if we know who these people are, and if their names are easily circulated between the police, the association and the operators, surely something must now be done to stamp them out. I hope that the Minister will push that matter back to the authorities and tell them that we want these criminals dealt with, and that we want to see examples set.

I have three pleas to make to the Minister this evening, and I hope that he can respond to them. The first is in the words of the Petrol Retailers Association. Let me quote again from the letter:

“I firmly support you and your colleagues in demanding from Government a fresh look at the real impact of this HMRC marker initiative and a renewed commitment to tackle the heinous problem of illicit fuel which has spread to the mainland.”

Secondly, I want the Government to review the sentencing policy and practice of those caught engaging in this heinous crime. Finally, as Brexit approaches, let us use this as an opportunity to make the United Kingdom have the gold standard fuel marker and to put in place a proper and effective British marker that works and stops this illicit trade. I hope that the Minister will be able to respond positively to these matters and offer me the opportunity to meet senior officials to address them.

7.13 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) for raising an important issue, which I know that he, his constituents, and the effective quartet of Members from Northern Ireland who are here this evening—*[Interruption.]* Quintet, I do apologise. Who could forget? I know that this is an issue that many people feel strongly about. I know that the Chancellor of the Exchequer will be delighted to hear that the Democratic Unionist party now wants to be cost neutral, and I will make sure that that is taken into consideration in future conversations.

Fuel duty makes an important contribution to the public finances. In 2016-17, it generated £28 billion, or nearly 5% of total tax revenue. It is the fifth largest source of tax revenue to the Exchequer, behind only income tax, national insurance contributions, VAT and corporation tax, so, as my hon. Friend rightly suggested, this matters. Fuel fraud is not a victimless crime. It deprives the Exchequer of funds that pay for public services, and fuel laundering—the removal of chemical dyes and covert markers from rebated fuel to give the appearance of legitimate road fuel—poses a range of further risks to the public. Criminals experimenting with the process to defeat the new marker can create, as we have seen, a high risk of explosion, fire and potential risk to life. Laundering plants also produce toxic waste, which causes environmental damage. Finally, as we have also seen, illicit fuel is often transported in vehicles that are unfit for purpose and unsafe. As with any form of fraud, fuel fraud is a serious concern, and we recognise that it can be linked to organised crime, serious organised crime and, as my hon. Friend argued, the financing of

paramilitary activity. That is a concern across the United Kingdom and, quite obviously, a particular concern in Northern Ireland.

For all those reasons and those set out by my hon. Friend, the Government are and must be committed to tackling the issue and to giving it the due consideration that it deserves. HMRC's strategy to tackle fuel duty fraud has seen the UK's tax gap for fuels in general fall from £1.5 billion in 2002 to less than £100 million in 2015-16, but £100 million remains a significant sum of money, as we have heard. In Northern Ireland, where the issue is a particular problem, the illicit market share has, according to HMRC, fallen from 26% to 8% over the same period. None the less, there is no room for complacency. Indeed, there has been a modest increase in laundering plant detections over the past year, which should give us all cause for concern. The new fuel marker that was brought in together with the Republic of Ireland in April 2015 to tackle the problem of fuel laundering is part of the significant investment made by HMRC to ensure that all businesses and individuals contribute to the tax revenues that are required to fund our public services. I appreciate that my hon. Friend has in the past raised objections to Accutrace, but I will return to those shortly.

As outlined in HMRC's evaluation of Accutrace, the new marker has led to a reduction in the number and size of fuel laundering plans discovered by HMRC, although there has been a modest uptick over the past year. That apparent success reflects our commitment to tackle fuel fraud, as evidenced by the reinvestment of over £1 billion in HMRC's fight against evasion and fraud over the spending review period. To continue that work, the Government announced the expansion of road fuel testing unit capacity in Northern Ireland in particular, but also in mainland Great Britain, in addition to the extra resource for fuel fraud work within HMRC's criminal investigation directorate that was announced in the autumn statement 2013. That should complement HMRC's fleet of road fuel testing vehicles, all of which are equipped with gas analysers that all officers have been fully trained to use. In 2016-17 alone, HMRC took 45,000 samples in the UK, so the problem is being addressed seriously at quite a scale across the UK.

Multi-agency, cross-border co-operation is clearly essential, and HMRC chairs a quarterly multi-agency cross-border fuel fraud group to share intelligence and information on operational activity, as well as co-ordinating joint operations. I have reiterated the importance of that with the Minister of State for Security and Economic Crime in advance of this debate. HMRC's testing capability can now identify markers down to parts per million, including the new Accutrace marker that has been introduced on both sides of the border. HMRC investigates all attempts to remove Accutrace. To date, HMRC advises that there is nothing to suggest that rebated fuel can successfully be laundered to remove the marker in a way that is not detectable to HMRC. Although all markers have theoretical vulnerabilities and there is no perfect marker on the market, this new marker cannot be removed profitably at any scale. It remains HMRC's view that the marker has been, and continues to be, effective in driving down fuel fraud. Clearly, I am interested in hearing further evidence from my hon. Friend if he wishes to engage with this. Where HMRC has detected laundering plants, these have not been capable of successfully laundering the new marker.

[Robert Jenrick]

My hon. Friend raised the question of custodial sentences. Custodial sentences for fuel laundering were handed down in 2016 following a successful HMRC investigation into a £2.6 million fuel laundering scheme. However, the scarcity of custodial sentences for what is clearly a serious crime is noticeable and disappointing. My hon. Friend was right to raise that matter today. Right hon. and hon. Members from Northern Ireland know that justice and policing are devolved matters, but I will give further consideration to this issue and I am happy to engage with them on how we might move forward. I am informed that sentences for this crime in Northern Ireland are, taken together, more lenient than those in England and Wales. We should all give that further consideration.

My hon. Friend mentioned points raised by the Road Haulage Association. I am happy to meet him to discuss these issues at a later date. We have increased our capacity in road fuel testing units, and have provided extra resource for fuel fraud investigations across the United Kingdom, particularly in Northern Ireland. I would be happy to supply further information from HMRC regarding the quantity and where the units are being deployed. I have asked HMRC officials to supply us with better data on the numbers and on the locations at which roadside testing is happening in Northern Ireland. Tests are completed throughout the supply chain. The number of tests at suppliers' premises in Northern Ireland has increased over the course of the last two financial years.

Ian Paisley: I really appreciate the level of engagement that the Minister is offering—both with himself and officials. Will he arrange for the Chancellor also to be

engaged in the discussions, so that we can ensure that he appreciates how seriously we want this matter to be addressed?

Robert Jenrick: I raised this matter with the Chancellor in advance of this debate, and he would be happy to meet my hon. Friend and his colleagues if they wish to join. I suggest that I arrange a meeting with him and others who wish to participate as soon as possible so that we can take this matter forward. In advance of that meeting I will review some of the other issues that he has raised and the points made by the Road Haulage Association so that we can have the most productive conversation possible. The Chancellor is very aware of the importance of this issue in Northern Ireland and of the assiduous way in which my hon. Friend has pursued it over many years—going back at least five years—by raising it with the Government and in Parliament, so we would be happy to take this matter forward.

I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issue. We have had a productive debate. I listened closely to the comments that he made and hope that I have been able to answer some of them. The Government are committed to tackling avoidance, evasion and fraud throughout the tax system. For all the reasons that we have heard this evening, this is an important issue that deserves our attention and deserves to be elevated in the level of importance to which HMRC and law enforcement authorities in the whole United Kingdom, but particularly in Northern Ireland, attach to it. I will do everything that I can from my position in the Treasury to ensure that that happens. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend and his colleagues to take this matter forward.

Question put and agreed to.

7.24 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 22 May 2018

[MR PETER BONE *in the Chair*]

UK Automotive Industry: Job Losses

9.30 am

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Before I call Matt Western to move the motion, it might help Members to know that, at 11.30 today, the Division bells will ring and there will be a minute's silence.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered job losses in the UK automotive industry.

I thank Mr Speaker for granting this debate. I also thank you in advance for your chairmanship, Mr Bone.

“Precipitous” is not a word used very often; when it is said by the chief executive of a major global automotive manufacturer, it is time to listen. Why? Because such utterances from major industrialists are rare; such people prefer to keep out of the headlines and to get on with the day-to-day of running multibillion-pound organisations that employ hundreds of thousands of people.

In the UK, the automotive industry has been one of the great success stories since the financial crash of 2007-08. In the two decades before that crisis, the industry's economic output was broadly flat, before it dropped sharply in 2009. Since then, we have been fortunate to witness a renaissance in this major industry, which was seriously damaged by the crash, but which managed to sustain itself, with some Government intervention, through that difficult period. In 2017, in real terms, the motor manufacturing industry was worth 25% more than in 2007, although growth appears to have levelled off in the last year. In 2007 motor vehicle manufacturing accounted for 5.4% of total UK manufacturing, but in 2017 it accounted for 8.1%—a 50% increase in its overall importance. That was the result of significant inward investment from all resident vehicle manufacturers and component suppliers. The industry has contributed to almost 10 consecutive years of steady growth. Just as importantly, that has translated into a 29% increase in direct manufacturing employment in the sector.

The headwinds are strong and many. As the industry meets the challenges of transitioning to cleaner fuels and to a super-low-carbon future, it has been disrupted by the uncertainty of Brexit and a Government policy that penalises the cleaner diesel-powered vehicles. It is one of the great paradoxes in business that, in seeking to improve air quality, the Government have managed the reverse the progress achieved over many years to reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

In my maiden speech last year, I stated that there were rising pressures on the industry and that action was needed to maintain its recent success. I warned of the slowdown, with falling sales, and that the industry represented an economic bellwether. It has become increasingly clear that, from trucks to cars, sales are falling as people decide not to replace their vehicles.

I have repeated those calls in many subsequent debates, and there have been many in recent months, including those held by my hon. Friends the Members for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). Both of their debates reflected the rising concern about the real, clear and present danger to the sector, and sought the attention of the Government so that they would act.

That danger has become very real since the autumn, with the announcement of job losses all over the UK. To date, 2,000 jobs have been lost among car manufacturers, and planned increases in staff recruitment have been put on hold. More widely, when the component suppliers and related sectors are taken into account, it is estimated that between 8,000 and 12,000 jobs at least have been lost in just eight months.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on getting this crucial debate. Given the numbers that he mentions, does he think we ought to return to the subject of the last debate we had here—business rates? The car industry needs a shot in the arm; is it not time that the Government gave it one?

Matt Western: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. The business rates situation handicaps the industry in this country and puts it at a significant disadvantage to competitors on the continent. Added to that are the energy costs that it faces: on average, there is a 74% premium on the energy costs on the continent.

Major manufacturers have told me that their greatest concern is that there seems to be little concern from the Government. It is disheartening that this apparent lack of interest flies in the face of the industry's importance to our overall economy. The financial services sector is held up as the great driver of UK national wealth, but it is worth remembering the increasingly important contribution of the UK motor vehicle manufacturing industry. According to the Library, it generated £15.2 billion of value to the economy in 2017, which is 0.8% of total output. More relevantly, it represents 8% of manufacturing output. Likewise, it employed 162,000 people across the UK in 2016, equating to 1% of all UK employees.

In UK manufacturing, the automotive industry is the second most investment-intensive sector for total investment as a proportion of gross value added, although it is top in value terms, investing £3.6 billion in 2015. The west midlands has the largest number of people employed in the manufacture of vehicles in any UK region or country—perhaps that is why this subject is so close to my heart. The 54,000 employees in our region represent around a third of all motor industry employees in the UK.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this timely debate. Not only are there direct employees, but for every direct employee there are probably two or three indirect employees—we are talking about the supply chain. There could be a massive effect if the problem is not handled properly. We need a transitional period, with electrification on the one hand and diesel on the other hand.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and I met the trade unions about this issue some months ago, and there is a lot of concern that it could affect jobs. With business rates, the Government

[Mr Jim Cunningham]

are shifting expenditure away from proper funding through the taxpayer to local government. That creates a major problem for local government and for the efficiency of these industries.

Matt Western: My hon. Friend makes an important contribution. He is quite right about the multiplier effect on supplier industries—component manufacturers and so on. I totally agree with him about the importance of establishing a very clear pathway for the transition between where we are and where we have set ourselves to be in future. I will speak about that at some length.

The employment statistics are significant by anyone's measure. The concern voiced by the industry is that direction is needed from policymakers, in particular with regard to Brexit and the UK's future trading relationships, as well as to support for the transition to clean fuels. Without that clarity, it is inevitable that investment decisions will be placed on hold.

People will cite recent announcements at Luton and elsewhere as great news about the future of the industry, but many of us will understand that those sorts of decisions are taken many years in advance—those were taken way before the EU referendum. Without clarity, there will be a recruitment freeze or job losses, as we have seen. One example of the recruitment freeze is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham, where Dagenham has recently announced that it will have to put on hold 150 planned jobs.

Just over a year ago, in March 2017, Lloyds bank conducted a survey of the UK automotive manufacturing sector. It summarised that the vast majority—some 87%—of automotive manufacturers planned to create new jobs in the next two years. It estimated that, if those plans were replicated across all the UK's automotive firms, a further 85,000 new jobs would be created. What a difference a year makes.

In the context of Brexit, there are concerns that there may be job losses in the industry in the long term. The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee conducted an inquiry into the impact of Brexit on the industry and stated that, should the UK leave the customs union and single market, hundreds of thousands of jobs could be lost. It reported that

“it is difficult to see how it would make economic sense for multinational volume manufacturers—the bulk of the UK automotive sector—to base production in the UK in a no deal or WTO tariff scenario. The shift of manufacturing to countries within the customs union and single market would be inevitable; the cost in UK jobs could be in the hundreds of thousands, and inward investment in the hundreds of millions. For the automotive sector, no deal would undoubtedly be hugely damaging. The Government should not seriously contemplate this outcome.”

Carlos Tavares, the chief executive of the PSA Group, which manufactures Peugeot and Citroën vehicles, said:

“We cannot invest in a world of uncertainty. No one is going to make huge investments without knowing what will be the final competitiveness of the Brexit outcome.”

That sentiment was echoed by others, including the chief executive of Jaguar Land Rover, Dr Ralf Speth, who said:

“Uncertainty is really challenging us very much and not only us, it's for the complete industry. You hardly see inward investment any more.”

Perhaps that should come as no surprise. Some have explained that job losses in manufacturing are an inevitability, and that we should embrace the loss of manufacturing in the post-Brexit era. One such voice is that of Professor Minford of Cardiff Business School, who has advocated “running down” the UK auto industry. In evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee in 2012, he said:

“It is perfectly true that if you remove protection of the sort that has been given particularly to the car industry and other manufacturing industries inside the protective wall, you will have a change in the situation facing that industry, and you are going to have to run it down. It will be in your interests to do it, just as in the same way we ran down the coal and steel industries. These things happen as evolution takes place in your economy.”

He echoed that statement in *The Sun* ahead of the EU referendum, writing:

“Over time, if we left the EU, it seems likely that we would mostly eliminate manufacturing, leaving mainly industries such as design, marketing and hi-tech. But this shouldn't scare us.”

Well, I am afraid it scares me, and I think it scares many of us—for good reason.

A while back, the BEIS Committee stated that

“it is difficult to see how it would make economic sense for multinational volume manufacturers—the bulk of the UK automotive sector—to base production in the UK... The shift of manufacturing to countries within the customs union and single market would be inevitable”,

and it would cost hundreds of thousands of jobs, as I said. The Committee concluded:

“Overall, no-one has argued there are advantages to be gained from Brexit for the automotive industry for the foreseeable future. We urge the Government to acknowledge this and to pursue an exercise in damage limitation in the negotiations. This involves retaining as close as possible a relationship with the existing EU regulatory and trading framework in order to give volume car manufacturing a realistic chance of surviving in this country.”

The Committee is not alone in voicing its fears. The automotive industry's trade body, the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, stated:

“There is no escaping the fact that being out of the customs union and single market will inevitably add barriers to trade, increase red tape and cost. Settling for ‘good’ access to each other's markets is not enough as it will only damage the UK's competitiveness and reduce our ability to attract investment and the high quality jobs that go with it.”

It is worth noting that in 2017, 86% of the UK's imports came from the EU, while only 41% of the UK's exports went to the EU.

Many say that the UK runs a widening trade surplus in motor vehicles with non-EU countries and a widening trade deficit with EU countries, and that leaving the EU and the customs union is therefore a positive thing. That is true, but the industry has responded by using its strength through the renaissance that I mentioned to reduce that deficit considerably. Importantly, the industry shows a determination to grow in other markets—it seeks to retain its strong position in Europe, but want to build elsewhere too. Other countries' domestic manufacturers are doing that, and we can do so too. It is not a choice between one and the other—they are complementary.

Our remaining in a customs union is critical to the sector's future. We must avoid at all costs losing tariff-free access to the EU. In the worst-case scenario, under World Trade Organisation rules, a 10% tariff on finished

vehicles and a 2.5% to 4.5% tariff on components would be introduced. Those tariff rates would cost the automotive sector at least £2.7 billion on imports and £1.8 billion on exports. Just imagine what would happen to the sticker price of vehicles in this country.

Ford has stated that rules of origin would “add a significant cost” to its business if UK-manufactured products were no longer considered to have originated in the EU. Similarly, Vauxhall has stated that any rules of origin changes

“will have a drastic impact on UK trade with any countries outside the EU”.

It is critical that a future UK-EU trade deal includes provision for full bilateral cumulation, which would ensure that components produced in the EU were considered local UK content for the purpose of rules of origin, and that the automotive sector was able to benefit from preferential trading relationships established with not only the EU but third countries.

It is worth noting that the majority of Ford’s Bridgend output goes to the EU. Without a comprehensive UK-EU free trade agreement, engines sent to European assembly plants would attract a 4.5% tariff, increasing the cost to the consumer. In an industry where margins are wafer-thin, that sort of tariff may cause significant damage to the sector. The SMMT’s position is clear. It has stated:

“Should the UK and the EU no longer have a customs union arrangement, UK businesses exporting to EU27 countries would need to submit information about the origin of the product, the destination country, relevant commodity codes, Customs Procedure Codes, product value, a unique consignment number, as well as relevant safety and security information. This would represent a significant increase in bureaucracy, and undermine the competitiveness of British business. Compliance with these new requirements would be particularly challenging for SMEs that make over 90% of the automotive supply chain.”

The components industry and the highly integrated supply chain are crucial to this debate. Currently, an estimated 1,100 trucks from the European Union deliver components worth £35 million to UK car engine plants every day. The movement of those vehicles and the timeliness of their departure and arrival is crucial—every minute counts. However, about 78,000 people are employed in the supply chain here in the UK, supplying not just the UK but Europe. The sector is highly integrated with the rest of Europe in the case of both finished cars and component parts. For instance, the UK imported just under £14 billion of vehicle engines and other components in 2017, 79% of which came from the EU. Some may ask, “Why can’t we transfer more of that back to the UK?” The complication is in scale, the strength of businesses and where they need to be located, and the geography of supply.

The manufacturers’ trade body, and the automotive trade body, the SMMT, have both called on the Government to protect that close integration. The financial reality of the chain’s fragility is underlined by the fact that some manufacturers face costs of up to £1 million an hour if production is stopped due to a delay in the supply of components to the assembly line. The SMMT estimates that a 15-minute delay to parts delivered just in time can cost manufacturers just under £1 million a year.

Let me give two examples. The manufacture of a single Delphi fuel injector takes more than 35 components, requiring 100 processes, and the elements for that come from 15 countries. The injector goes through 39 UK-EU

border crossings and five UK-customs union border crossings. Another example is the Mini crankshaft, which crosses the channel three times in a 2,000 mile journey before a finished car rolls off the production line. The casting is made in France before being transferred to Hams Hall back in the midlands, where it is crafted into shape. Those pieces are then sent to Munich and inserted into an engine, which is then sent to Mini’s plant in Oxford, where it is installed in a car.

Related to all of that is the importance of type approvals, a much overlooked area that can add significant cost. One engine supplier—I will not mention its name—has estimated that, if we do not have harmonisation with Europe, it will cost between £300,000 and £500,000 per vehicle certification. In fact, the CBI noted that the two areas where convergence with the EU is of the greatest importance are the rules that determine how and by whom vehicles can be approved as safe for the road, and the Vehicle Certification Agency maintaining its ability to approve vehicles for the European market. It also mentioned maintaining pan-European rules on carbon dioxide and other air pollutants to ensure that international targets on clean air and climate change are met.

That brings me to diesel. In the early 2000s, the drive to achieve climate change goals led to the rapid uptake of diesel: from 17% of the total car market, it grew to 50% in just eight years. The manufacturers responded. Ford set up its Dagenham diesel centre, which I think employs 3,000 staff and provides for 50% of all of its global diesel production. Then came the Volkswagen dieselgate scandal and subsequently the demonisation of diesel, which has led to a 33% drop in diesel sales so far this year. Once more, manufacturers have sought to respond where they have seen a lack of leadership, in this case perhaps from policy makers. Ford introduced a diesel scrappage scheme, as certain other manufacturers have done, and since September it has taken 21,000 vehicles off the road. The programme has been so successful that it was extended beyond December, when it was due to close, and is still running.

A tax on diesel was announced in the November 2017 Budget, with an increase in vehicle excise duty by one band and on benefit in kind by an additional 1% for all diesel vehicles. Some would say that that is kicking an industry when it is already struggling. The taxing of vehicles based on such a legislative standard has yet to be finalised or introduced by the EU; it is unprecedented and unrealistic. I suggest that the measure is counter-productive and merely makes worse the problem it seeks to solve. People are holding off buying new diesel vehicles and keeping on using older, polluting vehicles. Of course, the reduction in—or lack of—support for the diesel industry does not take into account the many hundreds of millions of pounds that it has already invested in manufacture, responding to the Government’s policy direction of five to 10 years ago.

Today’s diesels are the cleanest yet, having the same nitrous oxide and particulate emissions as petrol and 20% lower CO₂ emissions. To put it into context, it would take at least six of today’s new diesel cars to emit the same nitrous oxides as one vehicle put on the road just two years ago. The focus should therefore be on getting older vehicles off the road, not on penalising customers who wish to buy newer, cleaner diesels. Of course, the swing to petrol means a collective failure to

[*Matt Western*]

meet our carbon dioxide targets. Hon. Members will know that we are now seeing an uptick in carbon dioxide emissions for the first time in 15 years.

We see challenging issues in our deliberations over Brexit and the trading arrangements we face. That is best exemplified by the profound challenges faced by the automotive industry, one of our most successful industries. The industry has seen a renaissance, which was seriously damaged by the global financial crash, but it managed to sustain itself, and since then we have seen huge inward investment by various manufacturers, which has contributed to a 50% increase in manufacturing share, almost 10 years of steady growth and a consequent almost 30% increase in direct manufacturing employment in the sector, notwithstanding the growth in component suppliers.

The industry also faces the challenge of transitioning to cleaner fuels and a super-low-carbon future, and that is being disrupted by the uncertainty of Brexit and Government policy that seeks to penalise cleaner diesel-powered vehicles. It is currently one of the great paradoxes that, in seeking to improve air quality, the Government have managed to reverse the progress achieved over many years in reducing carbon dioxide emissions. As Mike Hawes, the chief executive of the SMMT, put it:

“The industry shares Government’s vision of a low-carbon future and is investing to get us there, but we can’t do it overnight; nor can we do it alone. The anti-diesel agenda has set back progress on climate change, while electric vehicle demand remains disappointingly low amid consumer concerns around charging infrastructure availability and affordability.

To accelerate fleet renewal, motorists must have the confidence to invest in the cleanest cars for their needs, however they are powered. A consistent approach to incentives and tax and greater investment in charging infrastructure will be critical. Now more than ever, we need a strategy that allows manufacturers time to invest, innovate and sell competitively, and which gives consumers every incentive to adapt.”

That is all the industry seeks: a controlled, orderly, managed transition from one system to the other. Regarding Brexit, it simply wants both clarity and certainty urgently.

Many are calling on the Government to act now to reduce the effects of diesel taxation on the newest, cleanest diesel vehicles and amend the carbon dioxide bands to reduce the impact of new emissions standards on consumer vehicle excise duty. Failure to do so will threaten the future success and sustainability of businesses and the significant contribution that the sector makes to jobs and the UK economy. The orderly, managed transition I described is essential to enable the manufacturers to use their revenues today to invest in our tomorrow. Without that support, the sector could be seriously damaged in its need to compete with the likes of China who have the scale and state backing to invest in newer technologies.

We have grown used to having a successful industry that contributes greatly not just to our international trade but to our global manufacturing prestige. We would be fools not to support it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. The winding-up speeches must start at 10.30 am, and 10 Back Benchers are trying to catch my eye. It is easy to work out: roughly three minutes each, please.

10 am

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone, and I thank the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) for securing this important debate.

Job losses in the automotive industry are of great concern to everybody, particularly to those of us with car manufacturers in our constituencies. My constituency, Chichester, is home to Rolls-Royce, which is the single largest employer and employs more than 1,700 people in highly skilled, well-paid jobs. Nationally, the automotive industry provides 814,000 jobs, with an annual turnover of £77.5 billion—more than 8% of the UK’s manufacturing output. The car manufacturing industry is of great importance not just to Chichester, but to the whole country.

I began my working life in a car factory in Liverpool where I worked for seven years. When I first started work, the industry was introducing a supply chain mechanism called just-in-time. First developed in Japan, just-in-time manufacturing would revolutionise the industry and make UK car manufacturing competitive and able to compete effectively with the rest of the world. However, just-in-time manufacturing is logistically complex: components arrive from suppliers based all over the world on the same day that they are to be assembled into a car or a sub-assembly, thereby avoiding the need to store large quantities of inventory that add to overhead costs.

Over decades the automotive industry has created a highly integrated and fast-paced supply chain, and that has been facilitated in Europe through the free movement of goods within the customs union. A car comprised of parts from throughout Europe will be assembled in around 20 days from start to finish, but not a screw will have been made before those 20 days. A network of suppliers based all over the world will be involved, and parts will sometimes cross borders several times before becoming a sub-assembly that is ready for final production. To put that in context, a crankshaft in a car manufactured in the UK will cross the English channel four times before being assembled into the final car.

The success of the supply chain network depends on many parts moving in a frictionless fashion. Imagine the effect that even a small delay at customs will have. I am probably one of the few Members of Parliament who have spent days sitting in customs, desperately waiting for parts to be released, to dash them back to a car factory where a line of workers are sitting eagerly waiting for work. Stopping a line in the manufacturing business is a disaster—it means all the cost, none of the production, and a knock-on delay for other plant production in future. To say it is a costly experience is an understatement.

Such delays make car manufacturing uncompetitive and would certainly lead to job losses. Car manufacturers will not risk that happening, and instead they will have to build warehouses to house stock. That will effectively set the industry back years, sending it back to the 1980s. What effect will that have on our roads? Lorries currently pass through customs in under two minutes, but if that time is doubled, it will have a huge impact on our ports and the surrounding roads. We must be innovative when we implement new customs arrangements and utilise technology to ensure there are no hold-ups at crossing

points. I am pleased that the Government are aiming to ensure that crossing points are as frictionless as possible, but we must ensure we get it right.

The size of the UK's car manufacturing industry is impressive, but we cannot take it for granted. Every new model is highly competitive, because a number of car plants located around the world will have similar capabilities but different labour rates and market conditions. As we leave the EU, the UK must remain competitive because increasing pull factors to other locations will seek to draw investment away from our shores. Thus far the industry has shown its support by investing further in the UK, and since 2010, jobs in car companies have increased by nearly 30%. If we continue to prioritise friction-free customs arrangements and continued close co-operation with the EU on rules of origin, harmonised standards and type approvals, I am optimistic that the automotive industry will continue to thrive and grow.

10.4 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on securing this debate. I fully support his goal of highlighting the need to support the car manufacturing industry, since it props up so many local economies in many ways.

The manufacturing base across the entire United Kingdom is important, but it is particularly important in Northern Ireland because of Bombardier, which employs some 4,000 people in the manufacture of aeroplanes. Bombardier is an essential primary and secondary employer in my constituency, as well as in neighbouring constituencies. It represents about 10% of our total exports and 40% of direct manufacturing jobs in Belfast, and its impact on wider manufacturing and the supply chain is felt across Northern Ireland. Investment in Bombardier is an investment not simply in job security but in local spending power. The hon. Gentleman made that point in his speech, and we understand it only too well.

County Antrim, which borders my constituency, is home to Wrightbus, which is a world-class bus manufacturer. It is increasingly recognised as one of Europe's leading providers of passenger transport solutions, having established a reputation built on a foundation of high-quality design and world-class engineering. Many of the buses in London today come from Wrightbus in North Antrim, and people can enjoy their very good finish. The company offers the largest portfolio of vehicles in the UK, covering midi, maxi, full-size, double-deck, articulated and hybrid-electric categories—no one would have thought there were so many kinds of buses, but there are. The widest range of chassis has elevated Wrightbus to being the largest independent manufacturer in the United Kingdom. I have done my duty to my hon. Friend and colleague the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) by highlighting that tremendous manufacturer in his constituency and the jobs that it creates, not only in North Antrim but across Northern Ireland because people travel to take advantage of those jobs.

The importance of such industries to the Northern Ireland economy cannot be overstated. Indeed, the manufacturing industry—with special reference to the motor manufacturing industry—was worth 25% more in 2017 than it was in 2007, although growth appears to

have levelled off in the past year. According to Library papers, the UK motor vehicle manufacturing industry contributed £15.2 billion to the economy in 2017. That was 0.8% of total output, and 8.1% of manufacturing output—those are very important figures—and it employed 162,000 people across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

I am conscious of the time, Mr Bone, and I want to ensure that other Members get to speak. In conclusion, therefore, there is capacity for more growth, but we have to speculate to accumulate. The industry needs support to thrive and—much like our industry at home—the dividend to the local economy is incredibly valuable. It is not enough to wait until the industry is on its knees; we must invest and support, and ensure that skills are taught for long-term survival. Most importantly, we must ensure in the post-Brexit era that we facilitate the industry to thrive globally. That can be done only by working in partnership and by doing all we can to help the industry foresee and meet the needs of a growing global market.

10.7 am

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone, and I thank the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) for securing this worthy debate on an issue that I know is important to his constituents. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party group for fair fuel for UK motorists and UK hauliers.

The British automotive industry has been the cornerstone of our economy and engineering sector for decades, yet it has known hardship in previous years. In 2000, the amount added to the economy by the motoring industry stood at £9.2 billion, but following the global economic recession, production slowed to £5.9 billion. Despite that, I am delighted to note that last year £15.2 billion was added to the economy by car manufacturing, and the number of those employed in that sector has also seen sustained growth.

Since 2010, employment has risen by nearly 30%, from 126,000 to 162,000 jobs. To put that in perspective, those involved in automotive construction account for approximately 8.1% of all manufacturing jobs in the UK, and according to recent research by Lloyds bank, there is potential for that figure to rise even further. The UK Government are keen to see similar progress on the environment and engagement with alternative fuels, which is one of the most pressing topics facing car manufacturers. As set out in our manifesto, we want a ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars by 2040, with the majority of cars and vans on the road in 2050 producing zero emissions. Although that is a considerable step, that commitment does not mean that we are turning our back on existing firms or on what has been achieved in the past. Instead, we wish to work with those organisations and guide them towards new and emerging technological avenues. I am sure all Members will agree on the vital need for such a change for the sake of the environment, but it would be wrong to present it as instantaneous.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy made the point recently:

“There's a place for diesel vehicles and will be for some time to come.”

[*Kirstene Hair*]

I hope the Minister will clarify that that means we can do more to improve environmental standards with respect to diesel and electric cars and that we will produce new systems that will have a starkly different impact on the environment but will still be familiar and accommodate the specific wishes of the user. The need for clarity on the issue is paramount. We have already seen the detrimental impact of the demonisation of certain sectors in favour of others. What follows is a loss of confidence, a decline in production and the loss of jobs. As we move forward, it must be clear that different fuels are supported equally in the UK. Only by promoting a nuanced manufacturing industry that prioritises development over exclusion will it be possible to encourage further foreign investment and allow the industry to thrive.

10.11 am

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on securing this debate on a sector that is so important to the city that I represent and the wider region. The automotive industry is at the heart of my home town of Coventry. The British motor industry was born there—the names originating there include Jaguar, Rover, Triumph and Armstrong Siddeley. The first ever British car was built in Coventry more than 120 years ago. The industry gave Coventry people much needed prosperity, and my city thrived because of that.

Coventry now boasts two world-class universities specialising in automation: Coventry University and the University of Warwick, with its Warwick Manufacturing Group. Coventry University is home to the National Transport Design Centre. The National Automotive Innovation Centre, a partnership between Jaguar Land Rover, Tata Motors European Technical Centre, WMG and the University of Warwick, is set to open this summer. It will be the largest automotive R&D facility in Europe and shows a commitment by the university and industry giants to continue Coventry's history as the UK's motor city. Jaguar Land Rover is now firmly entrenched in the makeup of the city, with the firm's headquarters at Whitley. Recently JLR even declared its intention to make Coventry the heart of its large-scale battery and electric vehicle production plans. JLR brings jobs and security to my city, as it does for the wider west midlands. Its success and Coventry's fortunes are inextricably tied.

With those things in mind, I share my hon. Friend's desire to protect the UK automotive industry at all costs. The UK's departure from the EU presents new challenges to the sector, which Jaguar Land Rover has openly stated may be detrimental to business. Uncertainty is bad for business. It is vital to offer safeguards to companies such as JLR and universities such as Coventry and Warwick to maintain the UK's place in the industry. Yet protecting Coventry's automotive status is vital not just for companies and universities but for employees. There have already been job losses in the west midlands, and people need guarantees, too.

I am thrilled to represent a city with a record as impressive as the one I have set out. I cannot wait to see the future developments in which Coventry will lead. I

hope that the Minister will tell us the Government's plans to help to protect the automotive industry and the jobs that it supports and to ensure that the sector thrives, in Coventry and more widely in the UK.

10.13 am

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on securing the debate. As we have heard from him and other hon. Members, the car industry is of strategic national importance. I am sure the Minister has heard that message loud and clear, so I will take the opportunity to focus on the issues facing the Vauxhall car plant in my constituency, which has lost nearly half its workforce in the past 12 months.

There is virtually no one in Ellesmere Port who does not have some connection with the plant. At its height, it employed about 12,000 people, but sadly, with recent job losses it employs only around a tenth of that number now. It is still a substantial number, however, and it does not take account of the many people employed in the supply chain and associated industries—or of the potential for much greater numbers if we were to increase from single-shift production again. The plant remains a big part of the local economy. Recent job losses there have meant our going against the national trend, with unemployment in the constituency shooting up in the past few months. Every job lost is of course an individual tragedy, but my job now, and the Government's job, is to make sure that those jobs that remain are protected and built on, because they are exactly the sort of jobs I want to see as a central component of our future: highly skilled permanent jobs in the manufacture of something that is a source of national and local pride.

Whatever our feelings about history and the pride that the plant generates, we cannot expect sentimentality from the new owner, the PSA Group, which has consistently said that each plant will be judged on its efficiency. If there is truly a level playing field, I welcome that. As we have heard, there are many things that we can do with respect to business rates and energy costs, for example, that can help. I know that the Minister has had a quite long list of the things that we would like to happen. However, one factor may make the competition unfair altogether and render all the other good work that is done academic—and that is Brexit. We have a clear message that the current uncertainty is delaying investment decisions by the parent company. Some might say that that is a ready-made excuse not to invest; but I do not want us to be in the business of providing people with excuses. I want us to be in the business of providing people with jobs. It is important to recognise that the automotive sector is one of our most vulnerable sectors, and we need to do everything possible now, as a priority, to safeguard jobs and investment. A bespoke trade deal for the automotive sector should be considered. After all, if it has been looked at for other areas, why not this one?

Vauxhall Motors has enjoyed half a century of production in Ellesmere Port. If that is taken away, a huge chunk of our identity will go with it, but it does not have to be that way. As hon. Members have said, the Government have a big challenge ahead, but I believe there are solutions, and we have heard some of them.

On behalf of everyone in the constituency, I express a sincere wish that between us we can all rise to that challenge.

10.16 am

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) for securing this important debate.

As many of my colleagues will know, Nissan has a large plant in my constituency, which employs about 7,000 people directly and 28,000 in the UK supply chain. It contributes significantly to the local and national economy. Nissan recently announced job losses at the plant, which was of course hugely disappointing news. Many people will have been concerned about the announcement, but I understand from speaking to Nissan at the time that, although it was unfortunate, the decision was due to anticipated drops in demand for vehicles currently under production. Based on business projections, it is expected that making the changes will allow for increased production of newer models in the future that will therefore provide more jobs in the long term.

With the uncertainty around the diesel industry because of Brexit, the move towards electric vehicles and drops in consumer confidence after the emissions scandal, it is easy to see how any loss of jobs can be seen as part of a wider concern. The motor vehicle manufacturing industry provided 7% of all UK manufacturing jobs in 2016, and it is only right to follow any changes closely and act to prevent further losses. With those points in mind, I want to talk about the Government's target to ban all sales of new petrol and diesel cars by 2040.

The UK is in the grip of an air pollution crisis—the Environment Secretary was talking about it this morning—with pollutants responsible for 40,000 premature deaths a year in the UK. I see two problems with the target, however. First, it is not ambitious enough to deal with the environmental issue with sufficient urgency or to ensure that the UK maintains its leadership on electric vehicles. Research shows that bringing the target forward by 10 years could nearly halve UK oil imports, support a larger number of jobs overall in the automotive sector and reduce total cumulative carbon dioxide emissions in a shorter period. Is the Minister's Department currently considering bringing the target forward?

Secondly, I do not see how consumers are being assisted in the industry-wide move away from more polluting cars and, ultimately, towards electric vehicles. Reaching any target will require a seismic change in consumer behaviour. In 2009, the Labour Government introduced a vehicle scrappage scheme designed to help the motor industry through the recession following the global financial crisis. It was co-funded by the Government and the car industry, and 400,000 claims were submitted. If we are now to expect consumers to move away from older and more polluting diesel and petrol vehicles, often at some expense, is it not right that the Government should assist them to do so, particularly when we consider that, historically, many consumers were encouraged to purchase diesel vehicles?

I had a lot more to say, but I shall leave my remarks there, to give other Members their moment in the sun.

10.19 am

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I start by declaring an interest; I chair the all-party parliamentary motor group, which receives support from the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, the Motorsport Industry Association and the RAC Foundation. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on his comprehensive tour of the challenges facing the UK's automotive industry and his explanation of how this industry literally drives economic growth in this country.

In the short time I have available, I will focus on two areas, both of which my hon. Friend covered: first, the challenges of Brexit, and secondly the transition away from petrol and diesel production. As he said, when we have over 1,000 trucks coming in across the channel every day, delivering £35 million worth of parts to build 6,600 cars and 9,800 engines every single day, most of which then go back to the European Union by similar means, achieving frictionless trade post Brexit is vital to this industry. I simply do not see a way of doing that except by continued membership of a customs union.

My hon. Friend also mentioned regulatory alignment. Keeping the Vehicle Certification Agency's ability to certify cars as safe for sale throughout the EU is key to the industry in this country. I ask the Minister what negotiations are going on to ensure that that is the case, and how he feels that could be achieved except through as close as possible a relationship with the single market.

On skills, a key part of the integration of the industry internationally, particularly across Europe, is the ability to transfer skills from one country to another. Frankly, the UK's visa requirements all too often get in the way of that, but the integration is at its closest with our European partners. I ask the Minister what negotiations are going on to ensure that, post Brexit, it will still be possible to transfer those skills between the UK automotive industry and partners on the other side of the channel.

Very briefly, in relation to the transition away from petrol and diesel, there are three challenges: anxiety over the range of electric vehicles, price and infrastructure. I hope that the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill will help to improve infrastructure, but I must say to the Minister that more needs to be done to ensure and to mandate interoperability of charge points. It makes no more sense to have differences on that than to have different domestic plugs depending on whether someone has a Dyson or a Hoover vacuum cleaner. What is being done to ensure that we can achieve on-street charging? In particular, what negotiations and what work are being undertaken to try to enable wireless charging? What are the Government doing to ensure that there is infrastructure in place not just for conventional electric vehicles, but for hydrogen-powered vehicles in the future?

My last point is on the transition. As my hon. Friend said, there is something wrong when the cleanest diesels are being hit the hardest. Of course, the UK's air quality crisis means there must be a trend away from petrol and diesel in the future, but the real challenge is to get the oldest and most polluting diesels off our roads, and we will not do that by hitting the cleanest ones. What are the Government's ideas for getting those older, more polluting diesels off the road? At the moment, the signals being sent out by Government are confused.

10.24 am

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): This is a very personal debate for me, because my Ford engine plant employs over 1,760 people and has 12,000 jobs associated with it. The plant covers the equivalent of 17 rugby pitches—we view size in that way in Wales. It produces one of five different engines every 30 seconds, and those go into seven different Ford models. Leaving the customs union means that the engines sent to European assembly plants will attract a 4.5% tariff, and it will inevitably lead to increased cost to consumers and loss of sales, leading to further loss of jobs.

Those of us who watch the automotive industry are concerned about the impact of Brexit and the confusion of Government policy on clean diesel. Changing diesel sales have not translated into petrol sales, and consumers are holding on to older products—cars and vans—for longer, slowing down air improvements. The Bridgend engine plant is a great example of the complex and integrated automotive supply chain across the EU.

There are a number of things we must be absolutely clear about. The Bridgend engine plant can be counted under originated content under the EU's rules of origin. Components flow from the EU into Bridgend, and engines flow back. That must continue unimpeded. A frictionless customs regime is essential for us. Mass producers such as the car industry, as we have already heard, need the just-in-time delivery principle. A 15-minute delay to parts delivered just in time can cost over £850,000 a year. Storage of stock just increases customer costs, as the cost knock-on to the car manufacturer is passed on to the consumer. We need zero-tariff trade; that is a minimum requirement and should form the basis of any trade deal for the future.

We have already heard reference to minimum customs costs and delay in moving goods. Regulatory alignment—a prerequisite for minimising customs delays—is crucial in preventing cumulative cost and restricted customer choice as a result of trying to meet different standards. Ford would be especially impacted by a change of type approval if the VCA certification was no longer approved in the EU, and by CO₂ targets if the UK was not included post 2020 in EU-wide calculations. Preferential trade with third countries, including Ford's trade flow with Turkey, facilitated by the EU-Turkey customs union, and with South Africa through the EU-South Africa free trade agreement, is important to the European business.

I will end by saying that Bridgend has seen the loss of jobs in steel manufacturing. Bridgend has seen the loss of jobs in coal. We do not wish to see further devastation to the constituency from the loss of jobs in the automotive trade.

10.27 am

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): As has been mentioned, this sector has been one of Britain's greatest manufacturing success stories, providing thousands of jobs and a major contribution to our country's economic growth. The story of my own constituency's past cannot be told without an understanding of the sector, dominated by Ford's Dagenham plant, which at its height employed some 40,000 workers. Today, Dagenham's two engine plants produce 1 million diesel engines annually—50% of Ford's global diesel requirement

—and provide over 3,000 jobs. Some 89% of those engines are exported. The total turnover stands at £1.75 billion.

However, investment in Britain's car industry has halved during the past two years. Brexit concerns and the demonization of diesel appear to be the two biggest challenges. The crisis of confidence in diesel vehicles and diesel technology was triggered by Volkswagen's emissions scandal, but the upshot has been damage to not just VW but the whole sector. I am not seeking to defend older diesel engines, which, in truth, are more polluting than their petrol counterparts. However, we must bring some nuance back into the debate. All diesel technology is being tarred with the same brush, despite the fact that state-of-the-art diesel technology is a vast improvement over its predecessors.

As has been mentioned, those dirtier engines will, ironically, be kept on the road longer if consumers are misinformed about the difference between diesel technologies. It is clean-diesel technology that is being invested in in Dagenham. Ford invested £490 million in developing clean, cutting-edge diesel technology in Dagenham in 2014. This new generation of clean engines meets the Euro 6 emissions standards and satisfies Transport for London's ultra-low emission zone. Modern Euro 6 diesel cars are the cleanest in history; they capture 99% of particulates and emit 84% fewer oxides of nitrogen than in 2000—a point worth making on the day the Government publish their new clean air strategy.

To help the Dagenham plant to transition to future technologies, we need to provide stability today and in the near future. That can be done only by supporting modern diesel technology and production, yet diesel sales have fallen 37% since last year. Unfair criticism and a misunderstanding of the technology are threatening thousands of high-quality jobs in my constituency; plans in Dagenham for 150 new jobs in 2017-18 were shelved due to falling demand. The overall lack of clarity around modern diesel compared with older diesel is also hurting the environment. In 2017, carbon tailpipe emissions rose for the first time in two decades.

My overall point is simple: the Government have a role in restoring consumer confidence in new diesel technology. They have to begin to make the case for modern diesel and for British jobs. That can and needs to be done, regardless of the outcome of the Brexit negotiations.

10.30 am

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I first pay tribute to the excellent presentation made by my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western). I will speak about the human consequences of what will happen if the Government get this wrong.

Erdington is rich in talent, but is one of the poorest constituencies in the country. However, we are blessed with having the Jaguar plant in our midst. The industry has now become the jewel in the crown of British manufacturing. It has been transformed, but it is characterised by its troubled history and by tragedies. I remember working night and day back in 2005 with Tony Woodley to try to prevent the collapse of Rover, and I remember that awful Friday when the factory finally collapsed and 5,000 workers were made redundant. However, in 2009 we saw the establishment of the

Automotive Council—the first great industrial strategy—and the scrappage scheme to save the industry from collapse. The basis was laid for a future to be built on.

In 2010, Tata Motors took over Jaguar Land Rover from Ford. It brought in two gifted German industrial managers, one of whom—chief executive Dr Ralf Speth—is still there to this day. We worked night and day with them to turn around a factory that was doomed to close and where there was a funereal atmosphere on the part of the workers. I will never forget that wonderful day in October 2010 when we stood outside the main gate and said that the factory that had built the Spitfire during the war and two generations of Jaguars after the war was safe for the next generation.

That transformed the lives of thousands of local workers. I will never forget Warren, who is a big bear of a man. I first met him at a jobs fair that we organised. Four years later, he was moving into a house in Edwards Road, just down from my constituency office. He called me over and told me about how he was buying this little Edwardian terraced house. He said how he had been in and out of work for 10 years before getting that apprenticeship, and was now in a job that he described as secure, well-paid work that he loved. He then turned to his partner and said, “I’m moving into the house of my dreams with the woman of my dreams.” He said that could never have happened had it not been for the success of Jaguar Land Rover.

Lives were transformed and progress was built on. I actually pay tribute to some of the things that the Government did by way of continuity of policy, such as with the Automotive Council; the focus on the industrial sector and the engine plant; the skills initiative; and investment in research and development. All of that was welcome. As a consequence, we saw the number of staff at the factory double from 1,400 when it faced closure in 2010 to 3,000, while GKN—the parts plant just up the road—increased its staff from 500 to 800. Thousands of local people were given the opportunities that Warren had.

However, we now face deep and growing difficulties. Some 1,000 workers are being laid off at the Solihull plant, while 240 workers have been transferred from the Jaguar plant to Solihull. Why? Because of the combination of utter confusion over diesel on the one hand—forgive me if I say this, but the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has grossly mishandled this situation and has sent the wrong message, having a serious impact on consumer confidence—and Brexit on the other.

I have only a short time remaining, so I will conclude. I wholeheartedly agree with the points made earlier. Hope emerges from despair. I once again see workers on production lines despairing and fearing for the future. Our fortunes are inextricably linked with those of the European Union—crucially, through the single market and the customs union. If we get it wrong over Brexit, this country will pay a very heavy price, and the people who will pay that price above all will be the workers in the automotive industry.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Before I call the spokesman for the Scottish National party, I am advised that the minute’s silence has been moved from 11.30 am to 2.30 pm.

10.34 am

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good, as always, to see you in the Chair, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on securing the debate. Critically, he highlighted the supply chain, which goes beyond the idea of the automotive industry and reaches every part of the industrial complex across the UK.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in their place, mentioned the issues for Northern Ireland. In Scotland in 2016, there were 4,000 employees in the industry, representing 2% of manufacturing employees in Scotland and 2.5% of all motor vehicle manufacturing employees across the UK. It continues to be an important industry, for not only employment but the economy. The industry has seen a steady increase in output since 2010. In real terms, the motor manufacturing industry was worth 25% more in 2017 than in 2007, although growth appears to have levelled off in the last year.

However, as other Members have highlighted, we need to recognise that the sector is highly integrated with the rest of Europe, in both finished cars and component parts. For instance, the UK imported £13.95 billion-worth of vehicle engines and parts in 2017, 79% of which came from the European Union. From my perspective, if the UK Government continue with their desire to leave the customs union and single market, it will have a detrimental impact on the industry and will cost jobs.

That is why the industry has called for the UK Government to change their approach to Brexit and opt to remain in the single market and customs union, to facilitate trade and investment. I hope that the UK Government listen to those calls and take action to protect the sector’s close integration with the rest of Europe as they negotiate our leaving the European Union.

As the Scottish National party spokesperson for industries of the future, I welcome the Government’s announcement of the automotive sector deal as part of the industrial strategy, as that should boost investment in emerging technology and establish leadership in meeting future mobility and clean growth challenges. However, with countries such as Estonia and Singapore at an advanced stage of preparation, and with investment in infrastructure that will allow them to take advantage of industries of the future, there is a danger that the automotive industry, and many other industries across the UK, are unprepared for the inevitable advancement that will be made.

As the Member for West Dunbartonshire, I know only too well the impact of industrial policy that fails to meet the challenges of the modern age—the complete and utter collapse of the industrial complex. I would not wish that on any other Member. From my perspective, the UK Government must therefore step up and lead on the issues that put thousands of jobs at risk, which would have an immediate impact on local economies and feed into the larger economy.

10.37 am

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on securing this important debate. He said that “the headwinds are strong and

[*Laura Pidcock*]

many” for the automotive sector. He went on to point out 16 issues, including business rates; energy costs; the move from older energies to renewables; the UK’s future trading relationship following our withdrawal from the EU; a freeze on recruitment in the industry; our leaving the customs union; huge uncertainty for businesses owing to a lack of certainty on the Government’s position on a future customs union; the potential shift of manufacturing to EU countries; the kind of regulatory framework that will exist following our withdrawal from the EU; added barriers to trade; the potential loss of tariff-free access; what will happen if we return to World Trade Organisation tariffs; and changes to rules of origin rules.

Other hon. Members then set out many more concerns, including about the impact on SMEs, which makes up 90% of the supply chain, and the complex EU-wide production web and the multiple border crossings needed for the production of a single car. They also spoke of dieselgate and the punitive measures currently levied on some of the cleanest diesel cars, and—crucially—of the lack of confidence for the car industry and its uncertainty over the Government’s position.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington also talked of how the automotive industry represents an economic bellwether and how crucial it is for the west midlands and his constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) talked about the automotive industry’s transformative effect on Coventry, including her constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) talked about the loss of almost half the jobs at the Vauxhall plant at Ellesmere Port. He repeatedly speaks up for his constituency. It was poignant to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) explain so eloquently how a job for Warren was about so much more than work. We know that, in every industry, it is about so much more; it is the lifeblood of a community.

It has been said many times that the automotive industry is one of the UK’s most successful sectors. It provides employment to more than 150,000 people across the UK and last year contributed £15.2 billion to the economy. There is no doubt that the continued success of the automotive sector is vital for workers and families across the UK and for the success of our economy as a whole, but worryingly it has been going through a challenging time.

Although there was an uplift in April, car sales plummeted in March by 15.7% compared with last year, and almost 2,000 job losses have been announced during the past six months. In January, despite all the assurances from the Government when PSA Group took over, Vauxhall announced 250 job losses, on top of the 400 lost last year, at its plant in Ellesmere Port, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston described. I pay tribute to him and to Unite the union for all the work that they did with PSA Group to protect as many jobs as possible for the future. In April, it was announced that Nissan would be cutting jobs in Sunderland, and last month Jaguar, the UK’s biggest car manufacturer—it employs 40,000 people—announced that it would be shedding 1,000 temporary contract workers in the west midlands.

Three reasons were listed for those cuts: low demand, with sales at Jaguar down by 26%; changes to tax on diesel cars; and the uncertainty caused by Brexit. Those three factors are all either wholly or partly within the Government’s control. They have complete control over the uncertainty on Brexit, or at least they would if they could sort out the Cabinet and it was not in so much chaos. They also have control over the confusion about taxation policy on diesel, but in recent months they have actually exacerbated it. Weak demand in the economy could be mitigated by Government policy through, for example, encouraging wage growth and Government spending to increase national income.

As has been said, the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders has highlighted just how important trade with the EU is to the automotive sector. It says that 1,100 trucks from the EU deliver components worth £35 million to UK car and engine plants every single day. The complex cross-border supply chains depend, crucially, on the free and frictionless movement of goods. Manufacturers are very concerned about that freedom and those frictionless borders being disrupted.

Mrs Hodgson: It has been one year, 10 months and 30 days since the UK voted to leave the European Union. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government have therefore had more than enough time to sort out their negotiating position on the customs union, considering how important it is?

Laura Pidcock: That is right. I have outlined previously that perhaps some of the confusion and slowness in the process is due to the fact that an initial set of negotiations has to be carried out with two or three Cabinet members before negotiations with the EU can take place.

The SMMT says that

“neither option currently being considered by government...would provide the frictionless movement of goods that UK automotive needs to maintain its competitiveness and productivity.”

It is right that the Labour party has called for the Government to negotiate a new comprehensive EU-UK customs union covering all goods. That is the best way to ensure that there are no tariffs or customs checks within Europe, to support jobs, particularly the 2.1 million UK manufacturing jobs, and to help to avoid, crucially, the need for a hard border in Northern Ireland. It would be very helpful if the Minister could use his closing remarks to set out how the Government will ensure the future security of the automotive industry and those employed in it, going beyond the bespoke assurances to the likes of Nissan and Peugeot. Those were important, but we need more than that.

The automotive industry in the UK is a great success story. We have heard a tour de force in defence of the industry from all hon. Members in the Chamber, but it is currently under huge pressure, and sadly that shows through in the increasingly frequent announcements about job losses and in sales figures. It is incumbent on the Government to work with businesses, industry bodies and trade unions and listen to them when they express very clearly that the Government should prioritise a customs arrangement that removes the risk of tariffs being imposed. We must, as an imperative, seek to protect workers’ jobs and secure the future success of the industry as a whole, and I would be grateful if the Minister could now set out how he intends to do that.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I am very grateful to the 10 Back-Bench Members who have spoken and the Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen for keeping their comments short—I know how difficult that is—to give the Minister the chance to reply fully to this excellent debate. I would just like to remind the Minister to leave a little time for the proposer of the debate to wind up.

10.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): Thank you, Mr Bone, for the iron discipline that you have exerted on the Members of Parliament here today. It has worked, because I have the time that you originally said I would.

I commend the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) not just for bringing about the debate—he has always very eloquently represented his constituents who work in the automotive industry—but for his speech. I think that it was described by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock), as a tour de force, and it was. I agreed with a lot of the things that he said; I agreed with contributions from hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber. A lot of the views expressed are based on severe concern about the automotive industry. We all know how critical it is to our economy—specifically to the constituencies of hon. Members who have spoken today, but also to the economy generally.

I would like to put it on the record that the only comment that I could really object to—I do not take offence, because it is part of the political system to say these things—is that the Government do not really care about the industry or are not involved with it. I can say from personal experience that that is not true. The automotive industry is at the top of our list. As was well published in most of the press, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State uses the automotive industry in the Cabinet as an example of the complexity of business within the European Union. There are well known examples of what happens to different parts. I saw one part in a car factory that had been in and out of the country seven times. Hon. Members, in their contributions today, gave similar examples.

In relation to communication with and listening to the industry, hon. Members should know that I meet, as does the Secretary of State, every Wednesday morning with the business representative organisations. The particularly relevant one here is the Engineering Employers Federation, which represents thousands of businesses up and down the country; many of them are involved with the automotive industry. Stephen Phipson, the director of EEF, may be known to hon. Members. He had worked in industry for most of his life and more recently had worked for the civil service in relation to trade. He has written a letter to one of the newspapers, explaining his recent visit to the Canadian-American border. He saw how complex, after many years, billions of dollars of expenditure and good will on both sides, movements across borders are even with electronic trading. A very important part of what we do in government is listening to people about that kind of thing.

I have made visits since I took on this portfolio, and I should say that I asked for the automotive industry to be part of my portfolio. I have not had constituency

experience of it, but in terms of manufacturing and this kind of manufacturing investment, I realise, as does the Secretary of State, how important it is to the economy. I think that it is fair to say that I have met executives from nearly all the major manufacturers in this country. I have met senior Japanese executives from Toyota, for example. That was with the Secretary of State, who made very clear the critical importance of frictionless trade between this country and the countries in the European Union. I agree with the comment made today that this country is not a big enough market on its own to sustain a healthy automotive industry.

The population is 60 million. The demand for new cars in a good year could be between 1 million and 2 million, along with all the components. This is big business. These are very complex parts. It is not as it was when the car industry started. We have to be part of a larger market. In whatever way it is worked out, it has to enable companies to do business as they are now. That includes regulatory matters, the frictionless—or near frictionless—movement of goods and the ability to recruit necessary labour. On a recent visit to BMW's Mini plant in Oxford, I saw—I may be wrong by 1% or 2%—that 21% or 22% of labour there was from the European Union. Fortunately for our economy, there is not a large number of unemployed people in the Oxford area and it is clear that that labour will have to come in, to work in a good career, in a fantastic company and in a fantastic factory.

I mention all that because the engagement aspect has not been communicated enough to hon. Members, but is a very important part of what we do. I believe that the interests of the automotive industry have been reflected in the negotiations. The shadow Minister made an eloquent speech, but she said that one of the delays has been a disagreement among the Cabinet on how this should be approached. That, however, is part of democracy. There are different views within the two major political parties. That is a legitimate part of democracy. I wish everyone agreed with me. They do not always, but I believe we will prevail. I had better make some progress. I spoke a lot on engagement with other companies and I have completely ignored the notes I made earlier, but I did feel that I should react to that.

There has been speculation today in the press that the decline in the diesel market has been caused by uncertain messaging. I think that it was the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) who suggested that comments made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs had been prejudicial to the diesel industry. It is important to note, however, what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy said about this last week:

“Diesel cars have played an important part in reducing CO₂ emissions from UK road transport. They can still play a valuable role in further reducing CO₂ emissions during the transition to zero emission vehicles.”

We have stated that we will end the sale of new conventional petrol and diesel cars and vans by 2040. That is a general European-wide policy. But we will shortly publish the Government's “Road to Zero” strategy, which will set out the gradual steps that we will take over the coming years to deliver our mission. The mission is for every car and van in the UK to be effectively zero emission by 2040. I think that will prove to be significantly beneficial to the UK car manufacturing industry.

Richard Burden: Consumer incentives will have to be part of the package that we hope will incentivise the shift towards zero emissions. The Government have scaled back both the plug-in car grant and the grant available for the home charging of electric vehicles. Does that not send out a confused signal, if we are trying to encourage people to make that shift?

Richard Harrington: One of the issues is not reducing the amount of grants, but where the grants should go, which I am happy to discuss separately with the hon. Gentleman, as I need to make progress due to lack of time. There are questions: for example, should hybrid cars receive the same grant as all electric cars? I would be delighted to meet him to talk this through, formally or informally.

I want to stress the importance that the automotive industry has to us with regard to the future. My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), while stressing frictionless trade, mentioned Rolls-Royce in her constituency and how it might appear as a small blob on a map compared to vast production, but it is critically important to the country and the local economy. I would be happy to accept her kind invitation to visit with her.

Investment generally in the UK auto industry is important to us. The industrial strategy and landmark automotive sector deal show how the Government can work with industry at the forefront of new technologies, to ensure that we remain the destination of choice for future investment decisions. There was good news, which hon. Members have mentioned, about the Luton plant with the Vivaro vans. Toyota announced that it will build the next generation Auris in Derbyshire. Those decisions are not to be sneered at, but are important. While I accept that decisions are made over a long period, I think that 10-year decisions for any significant investments are also important, but they can be pulled. Like any decisions, a company can decide to do that at the last minute for whatever reason it wants—for example, if it is short of money or if there is uncertainty in the market or points are raised about Brexit. Although they are long-term decisions, they are not decisions until they are finally made. BMW's investment in the electric Mini and Nissan's investment in Sunderland mean that since 2016, this country has won every single competitive model allocation decision by major car manufacturers. That does not mean we can take it for granted.

I would like to speak for an hour on the EU exit issue. I cannot, however, due to your quite rightly ruthless chairing, Mr Bone. The Government have reached an agreement on the terms of the implementation period, but we have to plan for all scenarios. I have a lot of confidence that we will leave with a deal and that a no-deal scenario in March 2019, which I think would be disastrous for the automotive industry—I am happy for that to be on record and will defend it to anybody—is

significantly less likely. I hope that it is totally unlikely. I hope that it does not happen and I believe that it will not happen. There needs to be a competitive market as part of a European-wide industry. It has been a huge success. It was Mrs Thatcher who persuaded many of the Japanese firms to invest here, because of the market that they would be involved in. Whatever hon. Members' different views about Mrs Thatcher are, I think that they will all agree that that has been a good thing for the country.

Our vision for the UK is clear. We are seeking a comprehensive solution, which includes most of the things that the industry wants, such as vehicle standards, one series of approvals and simple, frictionless movement for parts and labour, where it is required in the industry. We are pleased that the Government are producing a White Paper, which will set out in detail the UK's position on a future relationship. I think that it will be significant and show the exact terms of the relationship we are seeking with the EU and our preferred option for the future customs relationship, providing detail on precisely these issues, such as tariffs, rules of origin and mutual recognition, which are important to the industry.

I am happy to take up this discussion afterwards. I am meeting the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and others later today, and I am happy to meet any hon. Member to talk in more detail about this complex issue. In conclusion, hon. Members should know how strong the automotive sector is for us. We are a strong manufacturing nation. I believe that we will be a lot stronger. I thank everyone for their attention today.

10.58 am

Matt Western: I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this wide, but clear and focused debate on such an important industry. This industry has been a phenomenal success for the UK and we should all be proud of it, but it is being handicapped. We have heard from around the Chamber how the industry faces great challenges, such as clarity and direction over Brexit and the transformation to cleaner energy. On both challenges, it is within the Government's gift to set a policy to assist the industry—not necessarily to advantage the industry, but certainly not to disadvantage it as at present.

The industry has been extremely competitive, but it is being made uncompetitive as a result of contradictory policies from the Government, particularly the decisions of the Chancellor to further penalise a product that is critical to an orderly transition to a zero-carbon future, while achieving the international climate change obligations and reducing CO₂. I simply urge the Minister to revisit both those areas urgently. Whether it is diesel or the transition, we are hampering and damaging the most crucial manufacturing industry in this country.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Child Sexual Exploitation and Consent to Sexual Intercourse

11 am

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of child sexual exploitation and consent to sexual intercourse.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I am delighted to see that the Solicitor General is here to respond to the debate. I put on record, however, that I am disappointed that no one from the Home Office is here to discuss the issue. It was intended that the Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), would be here, but she is not. However unintentional that may be, I find it suggestive of a lack of interest in this topic—it is not the first time that I have had difficulty in engaging the Home Office on the issue.

Recent press coverage of child sexual exploitation and grooming gangs in Telford has enabled many victims to come forward. Some speak about historical crimes that they have not previously reported; others speak of the enormous challenges that they have faced in getting justice. I will focus on the latter point.

Anyone listening to the debate will be astonished, as I was, to learn that a child as young as 13 can be targeted and groomed for sex with multiple men, and that those men can say to police, by way of defence, “I had no reason to believe that she did not consent. I had no reason to believe that she was under 16.” In such circumstances, unless the victim can show otherwise, the police may not have the perpetrator charged with any offence at all. All the perpetrators have to do is say, “The victim willingly met for sex and did not tell me her age.”

It is worth pointing out that, under the Sexual Offences Act 2003, under-age sex is an offence and consent should not be a factor, but in practice, the police can take a different approach. That suggests that they may not fully understand grooming and the power that a perpetrator can exert over a victim who has been groomed. A child who is groomed into acquiescence is not willingly and voluntarily consenting to sex, but they may not get justice unless they can show that they made the perpetrators aware of their age and that they were unwilling.

Grooming is coercion, and it brings about a sense of control over the victim. It can be subtle or indirect, or it may be direct, by way of a threat to shame a child by exposing their sexual activity to their parent, school or friends. Either way, it is a process of psychological manipulation to force a vulnerable child to do something that they do not want to do and would not otherwise have done. That cannot be equated with consent. Just because physical force is not present, that cannot be grounds for the police to infer that a groomed child is consenting.

How can the authorities assume that a child as young as 13 would willingly consent to sex with multiple men? Let us be honest: in the cases I am talking about, the men are not in the child’s social network—they are not young teenagers from the child’s school, or known to the child’s parents or older siblings. They are groups of adult men targeting young girls through street grooming or in takeaways and restaurants. How can the police

possibly assume with good reason that the targeted child consents simply because she did not refuse sexual intercourse? Consent must be freely given without duress or coercion. Consent is a voluntary act.

A young girl in Telford was groomed for sex with a group of men. The grooming began while she was celebrating her 13th birthday in a local restaurant. While she was still 13, she became pregnant by one of those men, and her parents realised what was going on and went to the police. The identity of the perpetrators was not an issue and arrests were quickly made. Two things went wrong, however: the police failed to identify that the men were connected to each other, or that the child had been groomed. The police treated the men as if each one was in a separate relationship with the child. She was treated as willingly engaging in sexual activity with men she had voluntarily chosen to have a relationship with.

The offences the police were to consider in the case were rape and engaging in sexual activity with a child under 16. The police accepted that the perpetrators could not have known from the victim’s actions that she did not consent and, further, that the perpetrators reasonably believed that she was over 16, as she had not disclosed her true age to them until after she became pregnant.

It is clear in this case that the child could not articulate in the testimony that she gave to the police the psychological impact of grooming and coercion. When it was put to her by the police, she accepted that she had not told the perpetrators her age and that she had not refused sexual intercourse. Despite not wanting to have sex with any of the men, she accepted that they would not have known that she did not want to have sex, so the police did not ask the Crown Prosecution Service to bring charges. The grooming was ignored: she had not said no, she had not been physically forced and she was over 12, so it could not be rape, and as she had not revealed her true age, the perpetrators had a reasonable belief that she was over 16, so it could not be sex with a minor.

The destruction and damage to the girl’s life and to her family is impossible to communicate. The family exhausted every avenue in their battle to get justice. One perpetrator, who had sex with the child again while on bail, received three and a half years for sex with a minor, but all the agencies upheld the police’s position when complaints were brought. The family were told that it was right that no charges had been brought against the other perpetrators in the case. How do the parents explain that to their daughter? What message does it send to perpetrators if no charges are brought in such a case?

I want to believe that that is a one-off, isolated case, because under the law consent should not come into it at all. However, the family wrote to the Independent Police Complaints Commission, the CPS, the professional standards board, the Home Office and the Prime Minister, and all the parties that responded took the view that the police’s course of action was correct.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate on an important local and national issue, and on attracting to the debate the Solicitor General, who is probably the most qualified person in Parliament to respond. The police can always learn lessons, but charging decisions are often a joint

[Mark Pritchard]

exercise with the Crown Prosecution Service. Some of the cases she refers to are of vulnerable young adults who are known to the local authority, Telford and Wrekin Council, which is a key stakeholder in the issue, needs to get on with conducting the independent inquiry, appointing an independent chairman, restoring public confidence in the local council and ensuring that victims get the justice they deserve.

Lucy Allan: I fully agree with my hon. Friend that the Solicitor General is an eminent and learned colleague. I also agree with his point about Telford and Wrekin Council. Now that it has decided that it will have an investigation into child sexual exploitation in Telford, it is imperative that it gets on and appoints a chairman. We have already waited two months, and I cannot see that anything has happened yet. I hope it will take the opportunity to delay no longer on that. I thank my hon. Friend for making that point.

To return to the case that I was raising, the family wrote to all those different parties and the answer was that the case had been correctly handled. The CPS sent a letter to the family about the perpetrator who was responsible for the victim's pregnancy, which said:

"It was right that no charges have been brought in this case."

It explained why it came to that conclusion by saying that

"the prosecution must prove that a victim was not consenting to the sexual intercourse and...that the person accused did not reasonably believe that the victim was consenting."

It went on to say that the victim

"was clear that although she may not have wanted sexual intercourse...the suspect would not have been aware from her actions at the time that she did not want to have sexual intercourse...As such a charge of rape is not appropriate and indeed the police did not seek a charging decision from the CPS for an offence of rape."

It then addressed the possibility of bringing a charge of sexual activity with a child under 16, and said:

"The prosecution must prove beyond reasonable doubt that the suspect did not reasonably believe the victim was over 16. We could not prove this to the required standard. The victim agreed that she had not told the suspect her age until after she discovered that she was pregnant. I believe a jury may have doubts as to whether the suspect is guilty. For these reasons, it was right that no charges were brought against this suspect."

I repeat that it was judged

"right that no charges were brought against this suspect".

The authorities were telling the father of a child victim of abuse that there was no good reason to prosecute the men responsible.

Anyone else looking at the facts of this case would see grotesque and traumatic abuse and exploitation of a child by multiple perpetrators; anyone else would understand the lifelong impact that this horrendous crime would have on this child and her family. But the police did not see that. When I discussed this case with them, it was almost as if they thought that it had been the child seeking out the perpetrators and not the other way round. They did not value the account given by the victim. They did not see an abused child; they saw a young woman who had failed to reveal her true age willingly engaging in sexual activity with multiple men.

Social services became involved in the case after the event and held multi-agency meetings; in fact, they held a number of them. At every one of those meetings, what

was discussed was a behavioural contract for the child—a code of conduct for the victim. It was the victim who was placed on a curfew and not allowed out after school. I am sure that everyone in the extensive cast list at those multi-agency meetings meant well and wanted to protect the child from further harm, but why was it her behaviour that was in question and not the behaviour of the men who had committed the crime?

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making a very powerful speech, and what I am hearing is really concerning. The thought occurs to me that when an older man seeks to have sex—consensual sex, as he may think it is—with an obviously young girl, surely it is up to him to find out the girl's age, so that he can be confident that she is old enough to engage in sexual activity, rather than his just being blithely able to say, "I thought she was old enough". I assume that the girl in this case looked young; surely the onus is on the adult to ensure that she is of the age of consent.

Lucy Allan: Indeed—the hon. Lady makes an excellent point. She and I would both have reached that conclusion and many members of the public would, too, which is why I am glad that it has now been placed on the record.

It is difficult for me to understand why it was the victim's behaviour that was in question and not the behaviour of the men. It is almost as if it is an accepted norm that predatory grooming and exploitation of young girls will happen, and that it is the victim who must be controlled and not the perpetrators. That is not a world that any of us want a young person to grow up in. We all want to see vulnerable young people being protected, but does that really mean that young girls should be prevented from going out after school? In this case, the known perpetrators were released without charge and without any monitoring of their behaviour. That is more than just victim-blaming; it is a failure even to see that there is a victim.

That suggests that something is very wrong, because how is it that the police could fail to see an abused child when an ordinary member of the public would see one? The police acted as if this was a young woman freely entering into multiple relationships with multiple older men, each of whom—the police thought—did not realise they were doing anything wrong, as they thought she was over 16. In fact, one of the men suggested that he thought this 13-year-old was 18.

Are the police undervaluing or not even accepting the testimony of victims while accepting the testimony of the perpetrators, or is it just that they do not understand what grooming is and the impact that it can have on the way a child behaves? What is apparent is that there is no requirement to consider the impact of grooming and coercion, or the power that a perpetrator can have over a child victim, when the decision is made about whether to ask the Crown Prosecution Service to press charges.

Under sections 9 to 11 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, sex with a child under 16 is an offence irrespective of consent, and I am sure that the Minister will confirm that. Given that law, therefore, most of us would assume that in a case such as this, there is no need for the victim to prove that she did not consent or that the perpetrators knew her true age. In reality and in practice, however,

when a child is 13 or over, certain defences can be used, and indeed are used, that are readily accepted by the police without the defendant having to do anything more than simply tell the police their account of events. It must be wrong that individual police officers can, in effect, act as judge and jury and decide not to ask the CPS to charge, particularly in a case such as this one where some very serious offences have been committed.

Grooming is the means by which someone is forced to do something against their will. How could anyone believe that a child who is being groomed has free will to decide whether to have sex with their abusers? That is why we need to have an investigation in Telford and why I am delighted that there will now be such an investigation. Otherwise, how are we going to work out what needs to be done, so that the police and the authorities in general can respond differently in the future? I am glad that the local council has finally agreed to commission such an investigation, although it is due to the work of journalists, who brought some of these issues to light, that the investigation is now happening. I am very pleased that the press has the freedom to report on these issues and bring them out into the open.

I was going to ask the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle, to review the specific case that I have referred to today. I took details of the case to the Home Secretary in March, delivering them in person to the Home Office. I have not yet had a response, and I should be most grateful to receive one, if not from the Solicitor General then from the Home Office in due course. I hope that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary, who is also Minister for Women, will take the time to read the details of the case, which I have given to the Home Office, and indeed the report today's debate.

In a case where it is clear that a child is the victim of multiple acts of abuse by multiple perpetrators, there should be no reason for that child to show that the abusers knew she was 13 years old. Why should she have to show them that she did not consent to sexual activity, and why, in this particular case, was no evidence of grooming given to the CPS? I know that it is for the prosecution to prove guilt, but in a case such as this the prosecution is not even being given the opportunity to prove guilt, because no charges were brought. The victim and her family were dismissed by the authorities, more or less on the say-so of the male perpetrators.

In light of what we now know about grooming and child sexual exploitation, I ask the Solicitor General to consider whether it is time to update both the guidance to the police and perhaps the Sexual Offences Act 2003, particularly when it comes to the definition of consent. As I have said, consent cannot be implied by the absence of a refusal or the absence of physical force. Coercion and force can and do take many non-physical forms.

As more such cases come to light and we find out more about what is happening—the case that I have referred to is a recent case, not a historic one—it is essential that the police actively look for evidence of grooming that can they can then pass on to the CPS, which has to make the decision about charging. However, if the CPS does not have the evidence of grooming, then it cannot take it into consideration.

Most children in such circumstances will be unlikely to know that what has happened to them is grooming or coercion, and they certainly cannot be expected to

volunteer that information if all they are asked is, “Did you make it clear to the suspect that you did not want to have sex?”

We have come a long way in our response to this crime, but we must now consider whether the law is protecting children and young people from grooming and exploitation. As each case comes to light, we cannot just go on wringing our hands and saying how horrific it is that different cases are emerging up and down the country. If the law does not protect our children from being groomed and targeted for sex, we must update it.

I thank the Solicitor General for listening to what I have had to say today. It is only by listening to the experiences of MPs in their constituencies that the voices of victims are properly heard, and that is why I am disappointed that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department is not here today. The full picture can emerge only by our listening to the voices of the victims, and we need to understand how the law operates in practice, not just how it is written on the statute book. Only by understanding that can we take the necessary action to prevent this abuse happening to more victims. I would be most grateful if the Solicitor General could set out what action can be taken in cases such as the one I have described.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I had been expecting, as Chairman, that a Home Office Minister would be here, but we have an excellent substitute: the Solicitor General.

11.19 am

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone.

May I put on the record the reason for my presence at this debate, bearing in mind my ministerial responsibility as superintendent of the Crown Prosecution Service of England and Wales? As this debate has been quite rightly focused by my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) upon questions of law and the prosecution of these offences, it is entirely appropriate that I am appearing in Westminster Hall today.

May I assure my hon. Friend that I have already had an important conversation with the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, who is the Home Office Minister with responsibility for safeguarding? Indeed, Home Office officials are here today with me.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Telford on securing this debate. I know how much she has campaigned for the victims of child sexual exploitation in her constituency and how she has been a tireless champion of securing an independent inquiry into systematic issues that have resulted in a whole cohort of young people in her local area being failed by the authorities after having to suffer appalling abuse.

I speak not only as a Minister; I have many years' experience in prosecuting just this type of offence. Having taken what is now the Serious Crime Act 2015 through Parliament as a Minister, I am proud that in that Act we updated the law to remove old-fashioned references to child prostitution in acknowledgement of the fact that when it comes to consent we are dealing with children. These are children who deserve the protection of the law, and to apply to them the standards that can be applied to fully mature adults is a betrayal of their vulnerability and a failure to safeguard them. Over and above everything, the issue must be one of safeguarding.

[*The Solicitor General*]

Underlying some of the issues that my hon. Friend raised is perhaps a failure, at times, by the respective agencies and their representatives to understand that safeguarding must come first and therefore that the point of view of the child—the victim—is paramount, rather than considerations of another kind. If people understand that, we will make even further progress.

I have been part of a number of inter-ministerial groups on child sexual exploitation, from my time as a member of the coalition Government right through to this year, and I have been impressed by the sense of purpose the Government have shown in seeking to co-ordinate and improve the work that needs to be done to safeguard children. We have had new legislation on safeguarding and a robust response to the appalling incidents in Rotherham, Rochdale and other local areas that shone a light on the problem often encountered by young people in getting their story regarding child sexual exploitation heard and believed.

My hon. Friend raised a specific case, of which I am aware, and I know that she has written to colleagues in the Home Office. She will get a response; I will undertake to ensure that by writing to her. It would perhaps be invidious for me to make detailed comment on the merits of the case, as a further inquiry investigation is under way, but I take on board her points. She drew the important distinction between consent and knowledge of age, both of which issues I will deal with now, in general terms.

When a case meets the threshold, the police should refer it to the Crown Prosecution Service for a charging decision. That decision is then made by an independent prosecutor in accordance with the code for Crown prosecutors and CPS legal guidelines. On consent, it is important to draw a distinction between consent in fact and consent in law. In fact, the threshold for absence of consent in law is somewhat more rigorous. A child under the age of 16 cannot in law consent to a sexual act. Therefore, a person is guilty of a child sexual offence such as sexual activity with a child contrary to the 2003 Act if sexual activity takes place and the child is either under 13 or is under 16 and the perpetrator does not reasonably believe them to be 16 or over.

My hon. Friend referred to the question of reasonable belief and I assure her that the test is rigorous and takes into account all the evidence in the case. Proof of the age of a child is of course a simple, straightforward matter—date of birth can easily be proved. The question of reasonable belief often depends on the circumstances, but I can assure my hon. Friend that the old chestnut of, “I didn’t know her age. She didn’t tell me,” does not mean that the police and the prosecution are suddenly discharged of any responsibility to bring the case. Wider circumstances need to be considered and assessed. Each case must stand or fall on its facts, and the perception that somehow at all times the burden should be on the child to prove their position is not correct. It is important that we as Ministers and parliamentarians get that message out there, so that young people know that if they come forward they will be taken seriously and treated properly.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) knows well from experience—we have worked together on such issues and I am grateful

for her presence and her intervention today—that it is vital that young people know that we have moved on from the appalling response we saw in Rotherham and other local authorities and that that approach is no longer acceptable. The courts themselves, in sentencing, now readily acknowledge that. The idea that somehow a child can consent in any way to sexual activity, where consent is not an element of the offence, is no longer relevant in sentencing. Indeed, the courts no longer give defendants any mitigation or concession for so-called implied consent on the part of a victim who is a child. That has been an important development as well.

In the context of offences of rape, other than the rape of a child under 13 for which consent is not necessary, the absence of consent must be proved regardless of age. The definition of consent is that a person agrees by choice and has the freedom and capacity to do so—and there comes the issue. Again, it is important that we send the message out clearly that the age and circumstances of the complainant—the victim—must be taken into account in understanding age and capacity.

Acquiescence is not consent, and that message is vital, particularly in the context of some of the child sexual abuse of which we are all aware. The fact that a vulnerable or young person has been groomed starkly raises the reality that he or she may have been placed in a position in which they have merely acceded to sexual activity, rather than having given real, meaningful consent. The despicable actions of those who prey upon such young people should, and have, come under scrutiny when considering the issue of genuine consent. Even in the absence of clear evidence of grooming, a victim under the age of 16 is likely to be considered vulnerable, regardless of whether the defendant believes them to be older. Evidence that a victim has been drugged or is so intoxicated that they no longer have capacity to consent may also support the absence of consent *per se*.

Mrs Hodgson: I am not privy to all the facts of the case, but in the light of what the Solicitor General said about the age of consent being 16, I really struggle to understand why the men are at large and not behind bars. I am curious about that.

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to reiterate the point that has been made. I cannot comment on the specific case, but it is clear to me that we have moved a million light years from perpetrators being able to get away with such things with impunity.

Lucy Allan: Did my hon. and learned Friend say that there will be a review into the case I have put before the Home Office?

The Solicitor General: There is indeed a further investigation as a result of my hon. Friend’s letter and I have committed to writing to her about the outcome.

The tools that the prosecution now has are considerable. We even have tools relating to sending sexual communications to a child ahead of any grooming, which came into force last year, and for young people between the ages of 16 and 18 we also have preventive measures, such as sexual risk prevention orders. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the matter. I undertake to respond to her more fully in relation to the

specific offence and I reassure her that this Government, and this Solicitor General, take child sexual abuse extremely seriously.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

National Funding Formula: Social Mobility

[MR CHARLES WALKER *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

A one-minute silence was observed in memory of the victims of the Manchester attack.

2.31 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the national funding formula on social mobility.

My thoughts are with all those affected by the terrible atrocity last year in Manchester. We lived in Manchester for many years, and our children went to the arena many times. It could have been them.

A few weeks ago, I joined headteachers from Bath who had given up their Saturday to march through the city because schools are in the depths of a funding crisis that the Government are refusing to acknowledge. We are at a point where teachers are quite literally shouting in the streets, trying to get the Government to listen to them. Today, I am calling on the Government to listen—to listen to the people who are tasked with preparing the next generation for their lives to come, and to listen to them when they say they do not have enough money to do so.

The issue should not be a political football. Teachers simply do not have the resources to do their jobs properly. In 2015, schools were promised they would be funded in line with inflation. Later they were promised that “each school will see at least a small cash increase.”—[*Official Report*, 29 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 536.]

That has not happened. Schools are facing higher costs from increased pupil numbers, pensions, national insurance contributions, pay awards, inflation and the apprenticeship levy, while facing a reduction in the education services grant. By 2020, £8.6 billion will have been taken out of the system.

School budgets are at breaking point, with 55% of academies reporting deficit budgets and 75% of secondary schools saying they are spending more than their income. Some 23 local authority areas will see cuts of at least 5% by 2019-20. Some 91% of schools face real-terms cuts by 2019-20 as compared with 2015-16. As cuts continue, teachers as well as support staff are lost, because staffing forms around 85% to 90% of school budgets. In the last two years, 15,000 posts have been deleted in secondary schools.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Out of curiosity, I want to pick up on the point the hon. Lady is making and on funds being moved from one part of the country to another. Does she accept there are circumstances where some schools have historically received more funds but have perhaps had demographic changes, while other areas have also had demographic changes but need more funds? There has to be a point where a reallocation is necessary. We need that reallocation in West Sussex, for a start.

Wera Hobhouse: I accept the hon. Gentleman's point, but if he will allow me, I will point out how things look for my local authority of Bath and North East Somerset,

[*Wera Hobhouse*]

where school funding per pupil is falling in 58 schools and increasing in only 17. I would like to see local authorities where that balance is different.

In my local authority, three out of four schools are losing funding. For example, under the new funding system, one school in my constituency—Twerton Infant School and Nursery—will see a 0.5% increase next year. However, in September, it will be paying its teachers 2% more. It will also be paying its support staff between 2% and 5% more. If we add inflation on top—it is currently 2.5%—the financial outlook starts to look incredibly bleak. The school is facing a funding black hole of at least £50,000.

During Education questions last week, I asked the Minister whether school funding was rising in line with inflation. He dodged the question and suggested that the Government were helping schools by giving them advice for managing their energy bills. That very same day, the headteacher at Twerton Infants, George Samios, had been sitting with his business manager trying to find £50,000 in savings. Needless to say, £50,000 is significantly more than the school's energy bill.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that, while raising teachers' pay on the main scale is very welcome, it is pointless if it is not new money coming to schools? Otherwise, that money is being taken away from the frontline—the children.

Wera Hobhouse: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. My school is facing a funding black hole of £50,000. I assume that the situation in her schools will be exactly the same.

Responses like that of the Minister show how far detached the Government are from schools and teachers in Bath and across the country, as well as from the impact of their decisions on our young people. Twerton Infants has already had to cut the one-to-one support it used to have for children who had experienced early adversity and trauma.

That situation is not unique to Twerton. Headteachers from schools across Bath tell me regularly about the difficult decisions they are having to make. Parents will come to the school and ask, "Where is the extra support for my child with special educational needs?" The school will answer, "We are sorry, we do not have the funds to provide that anymore." If a school wants to put on extra support for a child with autism, that is not going to happen. If a school wants an extra member of staff to look after classes at lunchtime or to help children who are finding it difficult to transition, that is not going to happen. As one Bath headteacher put it:

"By starving our schools of funding, we are accepting that our children can get by on a cut-price education. Morally, let alone economically, this is indefensible."

Where is the understanding from Government of how our young people learn and progress? Where is the commitment to our children's futures? The Government say there is more money in the system than ever before, but there are more pupils in the system. The Government hide behind deliberately complex figures and funding streams and obfuscate the real picture.

I have recently become a trustee of a multi-academy trust in Bath. The trust's main concern is that it no longer has the funds to employ support staff, because its budgets are becoming tighter every year and it has no more reserves. The local authority in Bath, which used to support schools, is making staff redundant, especially those in welfare roles. The Government expect trusts to take over those functions, but the trusts do not have the money to do so.

What further increases the pressure and creates a vicious cycle is that good and experienced teachers are leaving the profession in growing numbers. Teaching is already a difficult job, but it is becoming so hard that many teachers find it impossible to cope. My academy trust in Bath finds it increasingly difficult to recruit qualified teachers, and it is worried about the de-professionalisation of teachers. Trusts, although not my particular trust, are employing teachers without qualified teacher status. That cannot be right.

I know the teaching profession very well. I taught secondary school children modern languages. An already difficult job became even harder when the resources were not there and class sizes were heading towards 30. It is our young people who suffer. Good classroom practitioners know that during a lesson they cannot just engage with the five pupils at the front or the five at the back. With large class sizes, it is the 20 pupils in the middle who are the most difficult to reach. What happens if teachers do not reach those young people? Those young people lose out, and an awful lot of them are losing out. If children do not receive the right support, they do not reach their full potential.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing what I would call a timely debate. In Coventry, I have visited 12 to 15 schools out of probably just over 100. Each of those schools is losing £275 a year per pupil. Nationally, probably about 3,000 youth clubs have been closed, which needs to be taken into consideration. The Government say that they have put more money in, but we should not forget that they cut £4.5 billion over the last couple of years, and put in £1.5 billion. Is it any wonder that schools are in the state they are? Certainly in Coventry there is very serious concern about rising numbers in classrooms. Does the hon. Lady agree?

Wera Hobhouse: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is not just about what happens in our classrooms; it is about what happens outside them. He makes a very powerful point. It is about the importance we place on our young people and their future. It is not only about schools, but about youth services, support and, as we are discussing today, social mobility and how we help people from disadvantaged backgrounds to thrive fully.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): I would not normally intervene at this stage in a debate, but I wanted to point out to the hon. Lady that when the national funding formula is fully implemented, funding for schools in Bath and North East Somerset will rise by 8.8%. That is one of the largest rises of any local authority. In her own constituency, it will rise by 7.1%, and the funding for the school she mentioned—Twerton Infant School—will rise to £5,457 per pupil, compared with the national average of £4,189.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the Minister for that intervention, but it is very clear that talking in percentages hides the real picture and does not tell us the per pupil funding. My headteacher in Twerton is absolutely clear that per pupil funding is going down, year on year, and the pupils who are particularly suffering are those who need extra support.

Nick Gibb: With regard to Twerton Infant School, I was talking about per pupil funding. It will rise to £5,457 per pupil once the national funding formula is implemented in full, compared with the national average of £4,189 per pupil.

Wera Hobhouse: I am listening to my headteacher, who has given me the numbers. If he gets a 0.5% increase, but has to pick up increases in teachers' pay and in support staff, his overall funding is going down. If the Minister is happy to meet with me and that headteacher, we can probably discuss it at an individual level.

If children do not receive the right support, they do not reach their full potential, which is a national tragedy, because we lose out as a country. We lose out on the nurses and teachers of the future, the software engineers and the hospitality professionals—the list is endless. We deprive Britain of the people who will continue building its prosperity. The worst thing is that the loss of opportunity particularly affects children and families from poorer areas.

In my maiden speech, I said that whenever I mention that I am the MP for Bath, people go, "Ooh, Bath, how beautiful!" It is, but like almost every other place in the country, Bath suffers from serious inequality. One fact illustrates that perfectly, and it is well known in Bath, but perhaps not outside it. Twerton Infant School, which I mentioned, lies on the number 20A bus route. Three stops on from Twerton, life expectancy increases by seven years. Let that sink in for a second—seven years' difference over a five-minute bus journey. The so-called "fair funding" formula eradicates the extra funding that used to go to schools in catchment areas with high levels of deprivation.

Jeremy Quin: We all agree that funds must be there to support those most in need. Personally, I welcomed the national funding formula's emphasis on ensuring that children who come from deprived backgrounds, or who have English as a second language and need extra support, get that targeted support. That is in addition to the pupil premium, which was a great triumph of the coalition. I think the hon. Lady is being a little unfair on the national funding formula.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I go by what I see on the ground. I have just explained that I am a trustee of a multi-academy trust. We are facing a problem with the loss of local authority staff, particularly in welfare and support roles. Trusts are meant to pick up those roles. They cannot, because they do not have the money, so staff who are helping young people with difficulties are not supported. That is the tragedy.

The important point is that the schools that most need the support are losing the most money. However, as we know from an announcement last week, the Government have found some extra money—£50 million

for grammar schools. To me, that clearly demonstrates that the Government are committed to inequality. Inequality has no place in our society. Every child has the right to achieve their full potential, and should receive the support and education to do so. That costs money, and the state has a duty to provide it.

Schools are in a funding crisis. I very much appreciate the Minister's being here today. I urge him to listen not just to me, but to teachers and headteachers across the country.

2.45 pm

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing the debate. It was very short-notice but, as she flagged up, this is an important issue.

This is one of those fascinating debates where it is a bit like the old cliché of apples and pears, in the sense that one side says one thing, and the other side tweaks it a wee bit, says, "It's an apple, not a pear," and stands the argument on its head. Rather than going round in circles, which we can do, frankly, for hours, I will mention one point in particular that strikes home to me.

I have been involved in politics for nigh on 20 years, and previously I spent many years in business. In all the years that I have been in politics, I have discovered that senior public sector people very rarely put their head above the parapet—for obvious reasons, as doing so can put their career in jeopardy. Whether that is right or wrong is irrelevant to the argument. The main thing is that colleagues will remember that, last year, 5,000 headteachers across the country not only wrote to their Members of Parliament and to the Government but went on a march, because they were so anxious about what they said were real-terms cuts to our schools budget. Before I get on to those cuts, I reiterate that I have never seen, in all my years in politics, so many senior people within schools say, "We can't be doing with this any more. We're going on a march. We need the money, otherwise our schools are in trouble." That was so significant to me.

Clearly I know a lot of my local schools, and I met a lot of the heads both when I was first an MP and during the time after I was briefly defenestrated before coming back as the Member of Parliament. I have known some of those people for a long time. I can even remember, in the halcyon days of the coalition, trying to get them to go public on particular issues. There was no way that they would put their head above the parapet, because they did not need the grief. On this issue, however, heads across the country—in Labour, Conservative and Liberal areas across England—were so angry that they rose up and said, "Our schools are facing a crisis."

To be fair, the then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening), listened and came up with an additional £1.3 billion. I am quite sure that there were sound political reasons for that as well, because of the snap election, but I will give her due credit because I think she deserves it. Despite our being on different sides politically, I thought that she was a good Secretary of State.

Layla Moran: Does my hon. Friend agree that it was slightly concerning that that £1.3 billion was not new money? When the Public Accounts Committee, on which I sit, questioned representatives from the Department

[Layla Moran]

on where that money would come from, they said that the vast majority of it was coming from so-called efficiency savings. At the time, they were unable to tell us exactly where the money was coming from. Does my hon. Friend share my worry about that?

Stephen Lloyd: I entirely agree. A lot of it was apparently not new money, and anyway, even with the best will in the world, it just held everything in place for 12 months—it did not solve the problem. As my hon. Friend has emphasised, as we began to pick into and drill down into those figures, what did we discover? We discovered that quite a lot of it was not the new money it was initially alleged to be.

Having said that, I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Putney. I believe that her heart was in the right place and that she was fighting the schools' corner as strongly as she could. I certainly think she was probably more on our side of the divide when it came to grammar schools, which is possibly why she is now the ex-Secretary of State—but who am I to make such an allegation?

I come back to the important fact that the headteachers—the people who know—say that funding is going down; there are not net increases, and it has been going on for years and causing real problems. Teachers have not had a decent wage increase in many years, and again, there is a real cross-party push on that. We are hearing soundings from within Government that there is an appreciation that teachers' wages need to be increased more in line with inflation, similar to the situation in the NHS. However, it is terribly important, to pick up on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), that that is done with new money. If we finally do get that salary increase for teachers, and there is the same story of efficiencies—after seven years they are really beginning to cut into the lean muscle, with the fat having gone from the whole sector—that will be very disappointing. If the Government sign off a good pay increase on the one hand but then on the other hand say that it has to come from school budgets, we will go even further backwards.

I have known the Minister a long time; I hold him in genuine respect, even with our disagreements in the past. I urge him to make a statement today about the scale of the salary rise and a commitment that it will be funded by new money and not taken from school budgets, which would just make a bad situation chronic.

My hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon and I have tabled an early-day motion today, specifically urging that the Government find new money to pay teachers a decent increase after their many years of getting static salary increases. I urge hon. Members to sign the early-day motion; I am sure it is very much a cross-party aim that many of us would support.

As I said, it comes down to apples and pears. The National Audit Office—as we all know, it is a highly reputable, respected body—says that in 2018-19, schools will experience additional cost pressures of 1.6%. That may not sound an awful lot, but after a few years of consistent 1%, 2% and 2.5% rises, and a failure to get net funding increases, it adds up considerably. The additional cost pressure comes on top of several years

of static Government funding and increases in pupil numbers, salary increments, employer national insurance contributions, employer pension contributions and inflation, meaning that real school budgets have seen a decline of—wait for it—about 15%.

I was in business for years before I went into politics. I know how to trim and how to make efficiency savings. When times are tough, we have to go through efficiency savings. I wholly signed up to those necessary efficiency savings in coalition, but there comes a time when a line needs to be drawn. If someone is looking at a 15% real-terms cut in their business, school or hospital, they are heading for a car crash. That is why I, my hon. Friend the Member for Bath, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon, who is the Liberal Democrat lead in this area, and the Labour party urge the Government to make a longer-term, significant increase to contributions to the schools budget, as well as a separate increase to teachers' wages.

Layla Moran: Does my hon. Friend recognise from meetings he has had with headteachers, as I have had, that the reason why this is significant is that roughly 75% of a school's budget goes on its teaching and support staff? The reduction in budget can only come from what is left. Schools have now got to the point where they can cut no more without affecting frontline staff, and that will lead to a drop in the quality of service that we can give children and parents across the country.

Stephen Lloyd: My hon. Friend is so right. We know that is true. Hon. Members will have spoken to their local headteachers and visited their schools. The number of teaching assistants has been slashed, and support for disabled children is under tremendous pressure. The schools are creaking—there are no two ways about it. I know that the budget is huge and there are thousands and thousands of schools across the country, but having proper funding is such a crucial part of our nation's future.

I reiterate the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bath about grammar school investment. I thought that, after the catastrophic consequence of the snap election in 2017 for the governing party, the whole idea of grammar schools had been kicked into the long grass. Suddenly, out of nowhere, it got into the headlines last week—another £50 million for grammar schools. There really are better ways than grammar schools in a society where we are trying to give everyone the same opportunities to succeed. Without banging on about it, there is so much empirical evidence that shows that they are counterproductive and do not improve outcomes for disadvantaged people. There is so much evidence there that I will not even bore the Minister by outlining it.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bath for securing this really important debate on an issue that affects our future and our children's future. I had the pleasure of welcoming pupils from a wonderful school in my constituency called Shinewater this morning. I know it well; I have visited it probably one gazillion times over the years that I have been either the MP or the parliamentary candidate. It is in a more disadvantaged part of my wonderful constituency of Eastbourne, in Langney. It is a great school with passionate teachers, and the sort of school where the Liberal Democrat policy of the pupil premium, which we delivered when

we were in coalition, makes such a difference. That additional funding and support means that children who may not have the obvious advantages that I and many other Members of Parliament have had have an equal chance to have a very successful life in their jobs and relationships.

It was wonderful to welcome the children here. They were all about six or seven years old. Many of them had never even been on a train, let alone an underground. It is so long ago that I was that young that I can barely remember, but it was a pleasure to welcome them. I know the pressure that school is under. It is a good school, and it is doing its best and doing well, but it does not have anywhere near the number of TAs that it used to have. Its funding for special educational needs is severely stretched, and likewise its funding from the county council. It is the sort of school where the teachers go the extra mile, beyond anything that any teachers would have even contemplated 30, 40 or 50 years ago. They do it because they are passionate about the children and the school. I urge the Minister to help us to help schools such as Shinewater around the country—to give them the budget they deserve, to give the teachers the salary rise they deserve and to secure our schools' funding and future for many years to come.

2.59 pm

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I am most grateful to be called to speak, Mr Walker, in particular because, only about five minutes ago, I intimated to you that I had not prepared a speech and did not intend to deliver one. I am most grateful that you have found time for me. This is an important subject, which it was important to raise, and I thought it deserved a longer airing in the House than would otherwise have been the case.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing the debate. My colleagues in West Sussex and I campaigned long and hard for a national funding formula. We were pleased to get a 5% increase in overall funding for the county, so I suppose I should congratulate the hon. Lady on doing better than that—the hon. Lady or, if I may be so bold, her predecessor. A 7% increase is possibly one of the highest increases achieved by any area of the country as a result of the NFF reallocation.

The hon. Lady is right that one can do a lot with statistics, but those I have seen show that we have, as a country, rightly put a huge emphasis on education. I think we have more than doubled our per pupil funding since the early 1990s, and we needed to: we expect a lot more from schools and teachers than we ever did before, and I pay credit to their huge commitment. Perhaps the Minister will correct me if I am wrong, but I believe we spend more per pupil on education than France or Germany. We need to—it is an investment in our future, and I am delighted that we make that commitment as a country. We owe it to our children and to our country to ensure that we have a fantastic cohort of children coming through.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): In my constituency, we get £171 less per pupil, so when we talk about funding increases, it is important to bear in mind that, outside London, the situation is not the same for every constituency—the funding formula may not be fair for areas that are deprived.

Jeremy Quin: I am most grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention. *[Interruption.]* I hear whispers from the direction of the Minister, so I am certain there will be an answer about per pupil funding of schools in Peterborough. I hope there shall be.

We have to look at where we were before the NFF came in and at what brought me and my colleagues here. The first meeting I had in this place as an MP was with the then Secretary of State for Education to insist that we push through the NFF, because we needed it. Historically, the allocations were all over the place, but data from about 2000 to 2005 revealed genuine demographic changes, meaning that funding should be better allocated.

Disparities between parts of the country remain—the Minister knows I think this—and over time they need to be addressed, but the NFF was a proper step in the right direction of allocating funds according to the need of individual pupils. We need to have a basic amount of funding per pupil, and we need to make certain that we get that right. Beyond that we also need to allocate according to the need or characteristics of individual pupils.

Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Gentleman not acknowledge that if we simply say, “We will increase per pupil funding,” but do not take into consideration inflation and other pressures on school budgets, such as teachers' pay rises and so forth, that does not give the proper picture?

Jeremy Quin: I totally accept the hon. Lady's point about significant cost pressures. Some of those have been through the system—we have gone over a hump in cost pressures in relation to pensions in particular—but she makes a valuable point about staff pay. That will need to be addressed, but I am sure we shall hear wise words on funding teachers' pay rises as they come through.

I recognise the issue of costs, but the debate is about funding and the NFF, and my county will get an extra £28 million as a result of the fully implemented national funding formula. West Sussex needed that funding, and that it received it was right. My secondary schools will get an increase of between 7% and 12%. There are increased costs, and I recognise those pressures, but the NFF is a fairer way of allocating funds than was previously the case.

Similarly to the hon. Lady, I have schools that have not done as well out of the NFF. Some of my primary schools are experiencing significant cost pressures, and I have talked to them and to the county about how to mitigate the impact of cost increases as they affect primary schools. I also have other issues, as the Minister knows. I would like more focus on the high-needs bloc, and I think the ASHE—the annual survey of hours and earnings—formula for allocating local costs of living in different areas could be improved. If I find a better way of doing it, I shall beat a path to the Minister's door, because areas such as Horsham have very high costs of living, and I am not sure that that is properly reflected in the ASHE formula, which may need some attention.

The motion, however, was about the national funding formula and social mobility. At core, yes, we must make certain to have the right level of per pupil funding throughout the country to ensure that our excellent teachers can deliver the curriculum to the best of their

[Jeremy Quin]

ability and give our kids the head start in life that they need and that we all want for them. However, the NFF is right to go beyond that: we also need to allocate according to the characteristics of the pupils, be that speaking English as a second language, being in receipt of free school meals or having low prior attainment.

Education is part of the answer to help the country achieve better social mobility—it is only part of the answer, but it is an important part. Surely an NFF approach through which we recognise the individual characteristics of pupils is the right approach. The NFF is not the perfect answer, and I shall continue to work on it and to bend the ear of the Minister, but it is a step in the right direction, and the Government were right to introduce it.

3.5 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker.

I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing the debate and for her eloquent and detailed speech outlining the key issues facing our schools and the negative impact that some of the Government's decisions are having on our children. I also thank the hon. Members for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) and for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) for their contributions, and other Members for their interventions.

It is safe to say that there is a consensus in the Chamber: we all agree that our system of school funding should be designed to improve social mobility. Sadly, that is probably where the agreement ends, because everything the Government do flies in the face of improving social mobility—from their inaction on low pay and insecure work to their punitive welfare reform measures, which led the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to conclude that almost 400,000 more children have been plunged into poverty in the past four years and that the number of children in poverty is due to soar over the next few years to a record 5.2 million. The new schools funding system is no different: it will not achieve social mobility.

Children should never be denied the same opportunities in life just because of the place they were born. Yet in the north, two to three-year-olds are less likely than their London counterparts to reach the expected standard of development when starting school, and the National Education Union has said schools in my part of the world—the north-east—face the biggest cuts, with one school due to lose nearly £8,000 per pupil. Success in life should not be the result of a postcode lottery, but under this Government it is.

I think I can pre-empt what the Minister will say. He will tell us that there is funding for children in disadvantaged areas, for children with low prior attainment and for children eligible for free school meals. That is correct, and it is welcome, but it is simply not good enough. It is not good enough, because it ignores the wider issues facing schools in terms of the implementation of the funding formula and the impact of the first cuts to school budgets in a generation.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Lady agree that headteachers are not just making that up? For example, a headteacher in a deprived area in my constituency is

not laying off support staff because he enjoys doing that; he is laying off support staff and those who help vulnerable children because he does not have the money.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I agree. I have had representations from headteachers, staff and support assistants in my constituency as well. That problem faces schools throughout our country—they are put in an intolerable position because their funding has been cut and cut.

The Education Secretary and the Chancellor of the Exchequer have both said that every school in the country will receive a cash-terms increase to their funding. We know, however, that that is simply not the case, as do the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies and the UK Statistics Authority, which has repeatedly told the Government that that claim is not accurate. Perhaps the Minister will get it right this time. I am sure that by now his Department has received the local funding formula for every local authority in the country. Can he tell us how many schools will face a real-terms cut to their budgets, and is he able to tell us where those schools are?

The Minister has told us of the local authorities that have written to his Department to seek permission to top-slice their budgets to fund additional high-needs support. How many schools across the country will see their block funding cut as a result of those decisions? Such cuts should not be necessary. Schools and councils should never be forced to choose between funding the day-to-day expenses of their schools and getting the high-needs funding that is vital to so many of their pupils' needs.

Layla Moran: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way and for raising the issue of special educational needs provision. The education, health and care plan system is not working in places such as Oxfordshire because the county does not have the resources to deliver it. Although the schools are able to come up with the plans, they and the county do not have the money. Is this a picture that she has seen, because it is inundating my inbox?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. A recent local ombudsman report said that the picture of ECHP plans across the country is dire, and local authorities are often spending more money on tribunals to rectify decisions they made in the face of cuts, rather than actually implementing the plans in the way they should be implemented in the first place.

The fact is that school budgets have been slashed for the first time in a generation. The National Audit Office found that, since 2015, £2.7 billion has been lost from school budgets in real terms. If the Government were not making cuts to school budgets, it would be possible to introduce a new funding formula in a way that was equitable and sustainable and that could actually improve social mobility, but the Government are failing to do that. When the revised funding formula was put forward after the snap general election, one of the major changes was the introduction of a minimum funding level per pupil in secondary schools. Given the way that the formula allocates funding and the extent to which it allocates more funding to disadvantaged pupils, a minimum

funding level would be particularly helpful to schools that take a very small number of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds—in other words, grammar schools.

When the £4,600 minimum per secondary school pupil was announced, the Government committed an extra £1.3 billion to schools over two years. How much of that additional funding will find its way to grammar schools? It seems to us in the Labour party that finding extra funding to go to grammar schools—most of them in areas represented by the Minister's colleagues on the Conservative Back Benches—is not a policy that will increase social mobility. In fact, it will do the opposite and focus resources more and more on the pupils who need it least, while those who need the additional support and additional funding will simply not have access to it.

We do not object to the principle of a minimum level of funding per pupil. However, it is worth remembering how the Conservative party arrived at that policy. When the funding formula was first devised, the Government did not believe that there should be a minimum funding level. Only after their Back Benchers—particularly those representing schools with more affluent intakes—raised concerns that they did not see enough extra funding in the formula did the Minister come to believe in the policy.

Although we welcome the belief in the minimum amount to which every single pupil should be entitled, I wish the Government would do this properly. Instead of finding a fraction of the funding that our schools need by making cuts elsewhere in an effort to buy off their own Back Benchers, why did the Minister not push to end the cuts to school budgets and increase per pupil funding in real terms for every single child, not just a minority of children?

Despite there being some elements of the funding formula that we welcome, the funding that goes to the most disadvantaged pupils is being cut in real terms year after year. Despite the rhetoric from the Government, the pupil premium has been falling in real terms every year since 2015. They have failed to increase the funding in line with inflation, which has led to the funding falling in real terms. In fact, it has fallen by £140 million.

A recent article in the press noted:

“A Department for Education source confirmed that in real terms the amount per pupil spent on the pupil premium specifically has fallen.”

Will the Minister confirm today that the per pupil spending on the pupil premium has fallen in real terms? Will he also tell us why, in reducing the funding formula, the Government have not ensured that that vital funding is protected?

Wera Hobhouse: The hon. Lady is very generous for allowing me to intervene again. Does she agree that the pupil premium introduced by the coalition Government was a powerful thing because it followed every single pupil around? The fact that funding per pupil is now being cut is a tragedy and is counter to what was radically introduced during the coalition Government.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. It will come as no surprise to her that I am a big advocate of the pupil premium and pupil premium plus.

Does the Minister really believe that the funding formula can truly support social mobility when it has not included meaningful protection of funding for the most disadvantaged students in our schools? He might say that the funding formula does not distribute pupil premium funding, but it would be disingenuous to act as though the two issues could be meaningfully separated. The issue of school funding and how it is allocated includes the pupil premium, whether the Minister considers them to be the same issue or not.

I sincerely hope that, in answering our questions and after listening to today's debate, the Minister will show some appreciation of the fact that it is simply not possible to really improve social mobility when the Government have cut school budgets for the first time in a generation and are slashing the funding that goes to the most disadvantaged pupils year after year. Frankly, Minister, our children deserve better.

3.16 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing this debate. I will start by saying that standards are rising significantly in our schools: 1.9 million more pupils are in schools now rated good or outstanding compared with 2010. Children are reading better thanks to our reforms and we secured the highest ever scores in the PIRLS—the progress in international reading literacy study—of nine-year-olds' reading ability when that was published last year. The proportion of young people taking at least two science subjects at GCSE has risen from 63% to 91%. Nine out of 10 young people now take at least two science subjects at GCSE.

The attainment gap between those from disadvantaged and advantaged backgrounds has closed by 10% both at primary and secondary level. We are spending record amounts of money on our schools: £42.4 billion this year, rising to £43.5 billion from next year. We are spending £2.5 billion on the pupil premium: £13 billion since 2010. None of that could have been afforded had we not made careful decisions about public spending across Whitehall when we came into office in 2010, tackling a historic budget deficit of £150 billion, equal to 10% of our GDP. The country was on the verge of bankruptcy owing to the banking crisis of 2008-09 and because of decisions taken by the previous Government. We brought that down to about 2% of GDP. We have the highest level of employment in our history and the lowest level of unemployment for 40 years, and that has enabled us to maintain spending in real terms per pupil in our schools.

Of course, there have been cost pressures, particularly in the three years leading up to last year: higher national insurance contributions, which help to deal with the deficit, and higher employer's pension contributions to the teachers' pension scheme are costs that schools have had to absorb. We are helping schools with our school resource management advice on how they can manage those costs.

Nick Gibb: Under the national funding formula no school will see a cut in funding this year or next year. They will all receive, through the national funding

[Nick Gibb]

formula, the money that is allocated to local authorities, which will be a rise of at least 0.5% for every school in the country and up to 3% this year for the lower-funded schools. How those local authorities allocate the funding to the schools this year and next year—we are allowing local discretion as we transition towards the national funding formula—will be for them to decide, but every local authority is receiving sufficient cash to pay at least a 0.5% increase to every single school in their area.

Wera Hobhouse: Can the Minister explain to me how advice increases funding? Advice is not the money that the schools need. In Bath, which has definitely not had a particular drop in population, 58 schools are losing and 17 are gaining. Almost three out of four schools are losing funding. How can the Minister explain that loss in funding?

Nick Gibb: Perhaps I may turn to schools in the hon. Lady's constituency. Funding for Bath and North East Somerset will rise by 8.8% once the national funding formula is fully implemented. That is an increase of £8.4 million under the national funding formula. As my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) said, it is one of the largest increases for any area. To take some individual examples of schools in the hon. Lady's constituency, Bathwick St Mary Church of England Primary School will have a rise of 9.5% once the national funding formula is fully implemented, and there are large increases for other schools in the constituency. She cited Twerton Infant School, whose funding level is £5,457 once the funding formula is fully implemented. That is significantly higher than the national average for a primary school of £4,189. In the move to a national funding formula, there will be schools that do not get as big an increase as schools in, for example, Horsham, or, indeed, other schools in her constituency that were underfunded, according to the formula. She happened to pick the one that was receiving a smaller increase than others, but that is because its per pupil funding of £5,457 under the formula is significantly higher than the national average.

Wera Hobhouse: Figures are figures, and can be turned one way or the other. I said in my speech that the funding increase received per pupil is 0.5%, but the extra pressures, which have been acknowledged, are mounting up to 4.5%. That is a lot of pressure—more than the extra funding. I worry about schools that are getting even less, because the head teachers in Bath do not lay people off for the fun of it. They do it because they do not have the necessary resources any more. Figures and percentages will not take that away. Will the Minister explain why headteachers have to lay off staff?

Nick Gibb: In circumstances where headteachers feel they have to do that, it is because they need to manage their funding within their budget. Funding for schools goes up and down depending on the number of pupils. If they have fewer pupils, they will of course receive less money per pupil and the overall budget will be less. That sometimes means planning for staff not to be replaced.

Stephen Lloyd: On that basis, how does the Minister explain the fact that in the past 18 months or so the number of schools releasing teaching assistants has grown faster than in the previous few years? Does he accept that that must be because of budgetary pressures and that, if it happens across the piece, it could lead to severe challenges down the line?

Nick Gibb: We have a benchmarking website where schools can look at their pupil-staff ratios. We have a tool that schools are using, called the curriculum-led financial planning tool. Schools can examine their curriculum using the tool, which was developed by some schools in the north of England—the Outwood Grange multi-academy trust—to ensure that over a three to five-year time span they are planning their staffing to reflect their curriculum. I think that a lot of schools are applying that tool and becoming more efficient. We are helping schools to manage their resources in a way that ensures they can balance the budget.

Every school will, according to the national funding formula, receive an increase in funding of at least 0.5%, but the Secretary of State has acknowledged on many occasions, as I have today, that there have been cost pressures: employers' national insurance contributions have risen, as they have across the public and private sectors, and there are higher employer's contributions to the teachers' pension scheme. We think that is the right thing to do, to get the balance of the cost of those things spread between the schools and the taxpayer and to help to deal with the deficit. We are helping schools to tackle those cost pressures, but the hon. Gentleman should remember that we are spending record amounts of money on schools—£42.4 billion this year rising to £43.5 billion next year. We have been able to do that and maintain per pupil funding in real terms because we have a strong economy and have managed the public finances in a sensible way, bringing down the deficit and keeping public spending under control.

Layla Moran: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way and for his acknowledgement of the increased cost pressures. Another cost pressure—welcome, in a sense—is the rise in pay, particularly for teachers on the main pay scale. I want that to continue, because as the Minister knows teacher retention and recruitment is a major issue in the sector, but does he agree that if it does continue we will at some point need new money in the system, so that we do not keep eating away at the tiny amounts left until it is necessary to cut the number of teachers to make the numbers work?

Nick Gibb: The hon. Lady will know that the School Teachers Review Body, the independent pay body that makes recommendations about teachers' pay, has reported to the Department, and we are looking at that report. We will respond to it, and I hope that that will be before the summer recess; that is our intention.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I have been following the Minister's remarks on overall funding. Does he seriously think that what the Government are now implementing makes up for the £2.7 billion lost since 2015 in the first cuts to school budgets in a generation and for all the neglect since 2010?

Nick Gibb: I remind the hon. Lady that last year schools funding was £41 billion. This year—2018-19—it is £42.4 billion, and in 2019-20 it will be £43.5 billion. As the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies has confirmed, that will allow us to maintain school and high-needs funding in real terms per pupil for the next two years. The IFS also pointed out that by 2020 real-terms per pupil funding will be some 70% higher than it was in 1990 and 50% higher than it was in 2000.

The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) acknowledged the extra £1.3 billion brought in, which we were able to identify last summer. We have been able to ensure that all schools, and all areas, will attract some additional funding over the next two years and have provided for up to 6% gains per pupil for underfunded schools by 2019-20. We have therefore, Mr Walker, gone further than our manifesto pledge—and I should have mentioned at the outset what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship; I was keen to get stuck into the debate. Now every school in every area will, under the national funding formula, receive at least 0.5% more per pupil this year than it received in 2017-18 and 1% more in 2019-20. The significant extra investment in schools demonstrates our commitment to ensuring that every child, regardless of their background, receives an excellent education.

During consultation on the formula, we heard that we could do more to support the schools that attract the lowest per pupil funding, something that the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) mentioned in her remarks. We listened to those concerns—something that I am criticised for, but I thought it was important to do so—and our formula will rightly direct significant increases towards those schools. In 2019-20, the formula will provide a minimum per pupil funding of £4,800 in respect of every secondary school and £3,500 in respect of every primary. That ensures that every school will attract a minimum level of funding through the formula, no matter what its pupil characteristics are. In addition, those schools will be able to attract even larger increases, as we have not limited their year-on-year gains to the 3%. Some of the lowest-funded schools in the country will therefore attract gains of more than 10% per pupil by 2019-20—something that I now understand the Labour party opposes. It therefore opposes, for example, the increase under the national funding formula of 10.1%—some £145,000—for Newbridge Primary School in the constituency of the hon. Member for Bath. That minimum funding also applies to St Stephen's Church School, which, under this system, will receive a funding increase of 17.5%, or £214,000. Beechen Cliff School will receive a 10.9% increase in funding, equal to £427,000, once the national funding formula is fully implemented.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Gibb: I will give way once I have finished this list, which I have to say is rather long. Hayesfield Girls' School in the constituency of the hon. Member for Bath will receive an 8% increase, equal to £335,000, once the national funding formula is fully implemented, and Oldfield Secondary School will receive a 9.4% increase of £414,000. Saint Gregory's Catholic College will receive an 8.2% increase once the funding formula is fully implemented, equal to £293,000.

With the national funding formula, we have been able to allocate funding to schools that historically have been underfunded. We listened carefully to the f40 campaign, of which my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham was part, and we want to deal with the historical unfairness of schools that have been underfunded year after year. We are addressing that, and the examples I have given show that we have a national funding formula from which schools in the constituency of the hon. Member for Bath are benefiting. Bath is getting one of the biggest increases of any local authority in the country, and I had hoped that she would come to this debate to congratulate the Government on taking a brave stance in implementing that funding formula.

Wera Hobhouse *rose*—

Mrs Lewell-Buck *rose*—

Nick Gibb: I will give way to the hon. Member for Bath since I mentioned her, and then to the shadow Minister.

Wera Hobhouse: The Minister is generous in giving way. I am grateful on behalf of any school that receives extra funding, but that extra funding should not come at the expense of other schools that most need more funding. To me, a fair funding formula should be based on the biggest need. As I said earlier, every child from whatever background should receive the education they deserve, but if we are to address social mobility, we must focus on those who need the most support. In Bath, schools in the most deprived areas are losing out, which is not acceptable.

Nick Gibb: But those schools are funded at significantly above the national average for schools, and if we are moving towards a national funding formula, that will be the consequence. We addressed that in our 2017 manifesto when we said that no school would have a cut in funding to get to the national funding formula position, but we changed that when we came back after 2017 and secured extra funding of £1.3 billion. That enabled us to introduce this minimum funding from which many schools in the hon. Lady's constituency have benefited and to ensure that no school will have a cut in funding, since the worst that can happen is a 0.5% increase in each of those two years.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: The Minister is talking about fairness and equity in the system, but what does he say to a school in the north-east that, according to the National Education Union, is set to lose £8,000 per pupil? How is that fair?

Nick Gibb: What the NEU is doing with its school cuts campaign is misleading. It is taking the cost pressures that we have acknowledged and telling the public that those are funding cuts. I have been clear that no school has had a funding cut. School funding went up in real terms per pupil in the last Parliament, and that increase has been maintained in real terms.¹ The NEU is talking about cost pressures that have had to be absorbed, not just by the school system but by other parts of the public sector and the private sector. The hon. Lady will know that once the national funding formula is fully implemented, funding in South Tyneside will increase by 4.5%, which is equal to £3.9 million more going into schools in that area.

1. [Official Report, 19 Jun 2018, Vol. 643, c. 1MC.]

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I was not going to intervene again, but the Minister mentioned my area, and I will not take any lessons from him about what is happening to schools on my patch. Teachers come to see me on a regular basis saying that they are at breaking point because the cuts are damaging their ability to continue. Some schools are saying that they will have to go down to teaching just four days a week. I am sorry, but the Minister is wrong when he talks about how great things are for school funding in south Tyneside .

Nick Gibb: I am saying that thanks to the £1.3 billion extra funding that we secured, schools in south Tyneside will receive an extra 4.5% once the funding formula is fully implemented, which is equal to £3.9 million. *[Interruption.]* I have acknowledged that over the last three years, up to 2017-18, there have been cost pressures. Higher employer national insurance contributions have had to be absorbed not just in the school sector but across the public and private sectors, and there have been higher teachers' pensions contributions, which was the right thing to do.

Jeremy Quin: I am slightly frustrated, so I will share my frustration with the Minister. I would like more money to be spent on schools—I think everyone in the Chamber would like more money to be spent on pupils, and we would like better standards even more. I know that standards are rising, and what is being achieved on the attainment gap is great. However, I am frustrated because when the Conservative party came into office with its coalition partner, there was a £145 billion deficit that the kids of today were going to have to pay back. It is all very well wanting more and more money spent on things, but that money has to be raised. In the past, billions and billions of pounds were being left for the schoolchildren of today to repay, and that is not fair either.

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend makes a good point, because that debt also carries an interest charge, which is similar to the overall amount of money we spend on schools each year. If we were to go down the Labour party's route of promising even more expenditure and borrowing tens of billions of pounds to renationalise whole swathes of the private sector, as was promised during the general election and has been promised since, we would add even more to the interest that we have to pay each year. Indeed, we would have to pay something like £9 billion more in interest charges than we pay already.

When fully implemented, the national funding formula will lead to a 4%—£3.4 million—increase in the constituency of the hon. Member for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya), and in Oxford West and Abingdon the increase will be 2.4%, which is £1.2 million extra for schools. Once the funding formula has been implemented in full, there will be a 3% increase in funding for schools in Oxfordshire as a whole, which is £10.5 million. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon referred to high-needs schools, and those schools will get an increase of 3.7% to £60.6 million. That important money is being spent on the most vulnerable children in our society, which is why there has been a 3.8% increase in funding in her area.

Layla Moran: Does the Minister understand the frustration not just of the teaching profession but of parents? I am a governor at one of the schools in Oxfordshire that he mentioned. Perhaps he is suggesting that the board of governors and I are not managing our money or resources properly. I assure him that we are doing everything we can for this issue not to affect frontline services, but it does. My question is simple: does the Minister accept that although he can spout numbers—it is true; these are facts—the reality on the ground in schools such as Botley Primary School in my constituency is that teachers are at breaking point, and parents are beginning to see the real effects of the cost pressures that are played off against the increases in funding that the Minister lists?

Nick Gibb: We have to live within our budget, and the Treasury has to work with the tax receipts it receives and deal with the historic budget deficit it inherited. Somebody has to lend the state that money, and they would not lend us £150 billion every year if we showed no sign of reducing that figure to something more manageable and did not plan ultimately to eliminate it altogether. That is what is happening. That is why we have a strong economy and the lowest level of unemployment for 40 years, why there are opportunities for young people to have a job once they leave our school system, and why fewer children are living in workless households. That is all part of how to manage the public sector in a serious way, which is what the Government have been doing since 2010. That is why we have been able to maintain school funding in real terms over that period, spend £23 billion on capital funding for schools, and fund an increase of 825,000 school places to deal with the increasing pupil population.¹

When we came into office in 2010, we discovered that the previous Government had cut 100,000 school places, despite the increase in the birth rate at the turn of the millennium. We were very sensible in how we managed the capital budget and the revenue budget at a time when we had to tackle a very serious budget deficit as a consequence of the banking crash in 2008.

Stephen Lloyd: The Minister has been talking a lot about the national fair funding formula and the additional money in the constituencies of the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) and of my hon. Friends the Members for Bath and for Oxford West and Abingdon. When exactly will that national funding formula come in? Does the Minister acknowledge that when it comes in, it will be taking over from cuts of upwards of 20%? There is an awful lot for it to make up for.

Nick Gibb: It came in this year, for 2018-19. In the first two years, because of the transition, we want to allow local authorities to have some discretion over how they implement it on a school by school basis. Most authorities are moving quite close to the national funding formula if not moving to it fully, but some want to tweak it for the two years of the transition, and we have allowed that. As I said, we acknowledge that there have been cost pressures, and are helping schools to manage those cost pressures. Going forward, as the IFS said, we are maintaining funding in real terms per pupil for the next two years, because we have managed to secure an extra £1.3 billion.

1. *[Official Report, 19 June 2018, Vol. 643, c. 2MC.]*

We are absolutely committed to providing the greatest support to the children who face the greatest barriers to success. That is why we have reformed not just the schools formula but high needs provision, by introducing a high needs national funding formula. It will distribute funding for children and young people with high needs more fairly, based on accepted indicators of need in each area. The extra money that we are making available means that every local authority will see a minimum increase in high needs funding of 0.5% in 2018 and 1% in 2019-20. Underfunded local authorities will receive gains of up to 3% a year per head for the next two years. Overall, local authorities will receive £6 billion to support those with high needs in 2018-19, up by more than £1 billion since 2013-14.

I will draw my remarks to a close, to allow the hon. Member for Bath to make a final contribution to the debate. I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate. Our prime concern is the investment we are making in schools and the steps we are taking to ensure that that money reaches the schools that need it most. That is why we have introduced the national funding formula.

We have been reforming our schools system since 2010, by changing the curriculum to improve the way children are taught to read and the way that maths is taught in our schools. We have reformed our GCSEs so that they are on a par with some of the qualifications taken in higher education institutions around the country. We have been improving behaviour; we have given teachers more powers to deal with bad behaviour in our schools. Standards are rising in our primary and secondary schools, and the attainment gap between children from wealthier and poorer families is closing by 10% in both. Clearly there is more to do, but we are on the right track. Our funding formula is a fairer and more transparent way of distributing funding to our schools.

3.45 pm

Wera Hobhouse: It has been a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I thank everybody who has contributed to the debate, including my hon. Friends the Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) and for

Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and the hon. Members for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya) and for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck).

I thank the Minister for his response. He has been eloquent in telling me how much funding the schools in my constituency have received, and I am sure that on an individual basis, some schools have increased their funding. But the overall picture is that of a funding crisis. I would not have been on the march that I mentioned at the beginning of the debate if headteachers were not so very desperate about the situation they are in. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne that this is the first time that people from the profession have gone directly on to the streets to shout about that. I urge the Minister to listen to the professionals—to the headteachers and the teachers across the country—who say that they are in crisis. I urge him to listen to the trust of which I am a trustee. We are very worried, because our reserves are running low and we cannot support schools, particularly in our more deprived areas in our multi-academy trust, because the funding is not there.

If we really are committed to social mobility, it is important that we look particularly at the schools in our more deprived areas and make sure that they receive extra support, rather than support being taken away from them. I will take him up on what he said about extra funding for high needs areas, and I will scrutinise that. I am not quite certain whether that is new money. I agree fully with Members who have said today that we need new money. The 0.5% extra money per pupil that has been put into the system does not make up for the pressures from extra pension contributions, inflation and pay rises. Whatever figures we are bandying around, I believe what I see on the ground. I listen to the parents and the teachers, and I look at the young people in my constituency. We should do so across the country, and make sure that young people do not lose out.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the effect of the national funding formula on social mobility.

3.46 pm

Sitting suspended.

Somerset County Council: Unitary Status

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Somerset County Council's plans for unitary status.

Thank you for calling me, Mr Hollobone. I am delighted to see my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) in his place, joining me today. This is an important subject to us, because it concerns the county of Somerset. A fortnight ago, the leader of the county council came to Westminster and threw an unexpected spanner in the works for all Somerset Members, who got no advance warning of the desperate plans to turn the whole county into a unitary. One by one, he spelled out his vision to us, and we were collectively gobsmacked—we had had no warning.

We knew that the county council was squeezed, and we understood the pressures of providing the most expensive public service with a small grant from Government. We also recognised that the writing had been on the same wall in Taunton for years. Funnily enough, it was back in 2006 that the idea of a Somerset unitary was originally conceived. I was there at that time; unfortunately my hon. Friend was not, but I believe that he was a county councillor.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): No.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: He says from a sedentary position that he was not, so that is me in the doghouse already.

The idea came from the dangerous mind of the chief executive, a tiny little man called Alan Jones—no surprises there. He was ruthless and he wanted a “lean, mean council”—his words. He went for the quick fix of getting rid of the district councils, and said the county could pocket—guess what?—£28 million. I will come back to that in a minute. Nobody ever knew quite how Jonesy arrived at £28 million, including me.

The present leader of the county council is still running with the idea 12 years later, and I am afraid that it is as wrong now as it was then. This is what rings alarm bells in my mind: Somerset County Council has never been good with money. I have looked at its books just to prove how bad it is. In 2007, it had only £11 million in the general reserve fund. Here we are, 11 years later, and it still has about £11 million—it is difficult to get a handle on it, but it is between £11 million and £18 million. That may sound like a lot in certain quarters, but it is chickenfeed when the overall budget runs into hundreds of millions. If an unexpected crisis happens—normally it does—there is nothing to fall back on, and unfortunately we have had that in Somerset. Occasionally, the place floods.

Alan Jones liked to pretend that everything was going well, but it was not then and it is not now. The county needed to borrow £376 million in 2007, so Napoleon Jones did a dodgy deal and signed his life away to IBM. He even persuaded his mates in Taunton Deane Borough Council to follow suit. Only two councils did so; the only other organisation to do so was the Avon and Somerset police force, known as the police farce. Together they created a thing called Southwest One,

an overblown IT monster that it was boasted would save money faster than anyone could print it. The two councils apparently stood to gain £200 million in savings if everything went according to plan, but it never does—not in Taunton, anyway. Welcome to the south-west bubble: our proud county town—that is what it is—where backhanders are normal and nobody trusts the leaders. The two councils handed over a mass of public money to a multinational, and they wondered why it went belly-up.

If only little Jonesy had got away with creating a unitary, there would have been even more money for—guess who?—IBM. Many of us know of it. The plan was taken over by the districts, but it was doomed because the public did not buy it. When the county council refused to hold a referendum, we—me and the MPs at the time—organised it ourselves, along with the district councils who, regardless of political colour, all subscribed to it. Two hundred thousand people voted, and 84% of them said no.

By July 2007, the people had spoken and unitary Somerset was dead in the water. My hon. Friend the Minister might like to know this. He is the Member for Richmond—I helped on the by-election for his predecessor, Mr William Hague, only because I was in the Army and had a car—and North Yorkshire had also planned to become a unitary, but that plan was rejected by the Government at exactly the same time. There is historical precedent.

As for the Somerset IT monster, Southwest One had only two councils on its books, which made its own death inevitable. Then along came the international financial crisis, the credit crunch and the grim dawn of austerity, which we all remember with no great fondness. Austerity for everybody? Not in Taunton. Jones was sacked by the county in 2009, but it cost £300,000 to get rid of him. Down the road at Taunton Deane, the other IBM champion, Penny James and Shirlene Adam are still in the top jobs and, I am afraid, heading for another IT disaster. They say that donkey dung floats—we have incontinent donkeys galore in Taunton.

By 2012, Somerset Council's borrowing was on course to hit £410 million, which means shelling out £100,000 every single day just to keep the loans going. All the while, the price of providing vital children's services and social care was going up, and I say gently to my hon. Friend the Minister that Government grants were coming down.

There is plenty of evidence that the council cannot control what it spends and tackles big problems by taking even more ridiculous risks. The learning and disability service was outsourced, for example, which made financial sense only if the savings added up, but, just like with Southwest One, the real cost outweighed the benefit. Learning and disability burst its budget and then faced extra cuts.

There are ongoing problems in several parts of the council. A recent peer review found that only 65% of promised savings actually took place, so I am afraid the reserves are running out. They were dwindling three years ago when a budget freeze was imposed, but things have got worse. By September 2016, the cabinet talked about declaring the authority bankrupt. It did not happen then, but it is dangerously close to happening now.

I am indebted to the work of Kevin Nacey, whom my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil knows well. He has been the head of finance at Somerset County Council for donkey's years. He has done the accounts since 2006, but he has had enough: as the latest county calamity began, he announced an early exit. Mr Nacey is off to pastures new, and—dare I say it?—a big juicy carrot: he will soon be in charge of the books of the donkey sanctuary. Eeyore would say of all this, “How very appropriate.”

I have several direct questions for the Minister. We have to work through this; we cannot go on like this in local government. Last week, he and I had another debate on the future of Taunton and West Somerset, which—dare I say?—the Government managed to get through. I feel I was unfair in what I said at the time, but I gently say that I strongly believe that the Government are not playing fair with local government. Last week I was a little more profound, but I was more cross; this week I am more measured.

Local government does matter. The Minister's constituency covers a vast geographical area—he has a seat bigger than mine, and I always think that Bridgwater and West Somerset is pretty large—and the problem for all of us is that the democratic deficit cannot be taken away without leaving a problem. Where unitary status has happened in very big counties, it has created enormous stresses, not least on the MPs in those areas. When councillors have to look after more and more, and deal with more and more, that deficit gets big. I ask him to pass this point on to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State: please think about the future of local government. I do not wish to spend whatever time I have in this place getting up every time I can to say to Ministers, “Could you please defend local government?”

Reorganisations are never good. In 1974 the Government of the day created Avon, which my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil is aware of. They created North Somerset and Bath and North East Somerset, which is now a unitary and is struggling because it is too small for a unitary. Maybe we as a county need to talk to Devon and to North Somerset.

Mr Fysh: My hon. Friend is making an interesting speech about the history of local government in Somerset. Does he not think, though, that to deal with the overhang of debt that the Liberal Democrats left the county with in 2009, it has been necessary to take a raft of difficult decisions? Is it not worth at least exploring ways of saving the taxpayers money? This proposal might be a solution, but like him, I would say it is imperative that we ensure no democratic deficit is created through the process.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He was a county councillor, and so was fully aware of the situation—more so than any of us. I am delighted to see that my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heapey), who I know had a pressing engagement, has made it here. He will recognise this point, because he wrote a devastatingly good article that follows on from what my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil has said. My hon. Friend puts forward a good case that we must look at the debt, look at our options and look at our future. I will take that first point first, if I may.

My hon. Friend is right that it was the Liberals who created the debt—not the Conservatives, but the Liberals. We are now living with that legacy, but it has to be faced. I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that it is our social services that are pulling us down. The problem we face is that we do not have enough money to take care of the neediest in our community.

The second point my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil makes, which I have made before and which I know my hon. Friend the Member for Wells agrees with, is that we should also look to our neighbours. My hon. Friend the Member for Wells wrote a good piece about looking toward BANES, and I mentioned looking toward Devon. We have no parameters—we could look at either of them—but we need democratic accountability. I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that if we are going to go through with any form of unitary, we need to have a referendum. If we need to look to the people of BANES to split up the ghastly edifice that is Avon and get our old county back, we will do that.

When Councillor Fothergill came to the House—he was very courteous; it was a very courteous meeting—I asked him directly about a referendum. He said, “I will hold negotiations or conversations with our stakeholders.” To me and to my hon. Friends the Members for Yeovil and for Wells, the stakeholders are our constituents. They are our stakeholders, not the Avon and Somerset police farce, based in Bristol, or the ambulance service, now based in Exeter, I believe, or the fire service, based wherever the heck it has got to now. We, the people of Somerset, are the stakeholders. That is who we represent.

I would like the Minister, if possible, to say a referendum should be held. We did not hold one in West Somerset. When I had to put my views gently to the Minister last week, I said that the majority of people who took part in what can only be described as a pretty desultory consultation were against that proposal, but they were ignored. I hope that will not be the format for the future.

I say to the Minister, please do not underestimate the ability of Somerset to fight back. We have done it once, and we will do it again. The last time was the battle of Sedgemoor in 1685, which happened in my constituency, very close to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Wells. We marched on London. This time we are coming by train, so we will not get it wrong, and I assure the Minister that we will do what we have to in order to overturn this decision. I therefore urge him to think constructively about a great county such as Somerset. We have had our traumas, but we have a team that is blue throughout, and we want to keep that.

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does he agree that, while a referendum is certainly the way to finish this process with full public support, the problem with referendums in recent years is that people have sometimes gone into them with incomplete information at their disposal? We must insist that the county council and the districts fully resource the analysis of all possible courses of action, so that a decision can be made on our future as a county based on all facts, rather than those selectively presented to engineer the outcome the county council desires?

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I could not have put it better myself. My hon. Friend does a phenomenal job up on the north flank of Somerset. He is absolutely correct in

[*Mr Liddell-Grainger*]

what he says. We must take local opinion into account—not by saying in some waffly way, “Well, it’s quite a good idea,” but by saying, “A referendum must be held.” As I think my hon. Friend alluded to, his preference would be to go north and look toward BANES, if possible. We need to talk about that. It is no good the county council leader’s turning up in the House of Commons to try to persuade MPs of a course of action.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I am not from Somerset; I am an MP for Oxfordshire, which of course is thinking of going through a unitary process as well. Does my hon. Friend think it is wise for councils that are thinking about that to share common experience and the enthusiasm that he has for a referendum on these issues?

Mr Liddell-Grainger: My hon. Friend and I have worked together for many years, and I totally respect his guidance and thoughts on this. That is a wake-up call to the Minister. We need to have referendums, because this process is not working the way it should. We need to take public opinion into account, and a referendum is the way to do that. The Government need to make sure that they insist on referendums and therefore that we have democratic control, as opposed to a democratic deficit, which is where I started in the first place.

I therefore say to the Minister that this plan is a dangerous, unwarranted and unnecessary intrusion into government in Somerset. We will talk about it and look at it, but at the moment there is no merit in doing it. In fact, it would be more sensible for the districts to take over the county’s functions than for the county to take over the districts’ functions, because the difference is that the districts will not go bust.

4.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, for what I think is the first time in my new role. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) not only on securing this important debate, but on his continued engagement on the topic of local government. I have enjoyed the discussions I have had with him in previous parliamentary Committees and debates, and I look forward to many more. It is also a pleasure to see my hon. Friends the Members for Yeovil (Mr Fysh), for Wells (James Heapey) and for Henley (John Howell) contribute to the debate, and perhaps we may have the honour of hearing from my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) later.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset will have heard me say before that the Government are committed to considering locally led proposals for unitarisation and mergers between councils, where requested. He will also have heard me say that the Government are not in the business of imposing top-down solutions on local government; we wait to hear proposals delivered, developed and initiated by local government.

Only last week, as my hon. Friend mentioned, we discussed in a Delegated Legislation Committee the draft secondary legislation that, if Parliament approves

and it is made, would implement the merger proposal that was submitted to the Government by two district councils in Somerset, West Somerset and Taunton Deane. Today we are considering the possibility of Somerset councils wishing to pursue further restructuring to form unitary local government in Somerset.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government said earlier this month, the Government believe that there is space and scope for unitary authorities, and where unitary authorities can seek to make a difference, the Government will support that. However, we want to hear from the sector itself on the benefits that can be experienced, and we will listen.

There are two unitary councils in the ceremonial county of Somerset—Bath and North East Somerset Council and North Somerset Council. It is important to put on the record that the Government have not received any proposals from the county council or any of the district councils for further unitarisation in Somerset. However, should such locally led proposals emerge, we would of course consider them.

If such proposals were to emerge, the Government have laid out previously the three specific criteria that we will use to judge them. It will be helpful to Members if I lay them out. The first criterion is that the proposal is likely to improve local government in the area, by improving service delivery, giving greater value for money, yielding cost savings, providing stronger strategic and local leadership, delivering more sustainable structures and avoiding a fragmentation of major services.

The second criterion is that the proposed structure is a credible geography consisting of one or more existing local government areas and that the population of any proposed unitary authority must be substantial.

James Heapey: Since the county council kicked off this conversation a couple of weeks ago, it has come to my attention that the Government have a figure in mind for what “substantial” means, in terms of the minimum size of an authority. Will the Minister offer any detail on that?

Rishi Sunak: My predecessors, the Secretary of State and myself have previously laid out that a unitary authority should contain at least 300,000 people or more. That figure comes from research conducted by the Department in the past. However, each proposal will be considered on its merits.

The third and final criterion is that the proposal commands local support. In particular, the structure must be proposed by one or more existing councils in the area, and there must be evidence of a good deal of local support for it.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: Will the Minister say these wonderful words: there should be a referendum?

Rishi Sunak: I am afraid that I cannot say those specific words; indeed, that is not the Government’s previous guidance. The criterion is that there should be evidence of a good deal of local support for the proposal, including from business, the voluntary sector, public bodies and local communities.

My hon. Friend will know from the various proposals that the Government have already considered that there have been a range of ways to demonstrate that good deal of local support. Other areas have engaged electoral and polling agencies to conduct representative polling, county and district council members—who represent people in different areas—have voted and extensive engagement exercises and consultation processes have happened. There are various mechanisms, but the key is that, at the end of the day, there must be evidence of a good deal of local support.

I will elaborate a little further on what a good deal of local support means, as opposed to the mechanism for establishing that it is there. We would like to see a good deal of local support, which we assess in the round across the whole area—from business, the voluntary sector, public bodies and local communities. We do not mean unanimous agreement from all councillors, stakeholders, councils and residents. However, we expect as much consensus from councils as possible.

My hon. Friend talked about democratic deficits, and he is right to highlight the importance of local democracy. From parish councils and all the way up, strong local democracy serves communities well and can make a difference to how people live their lives and to the area that they call home. We have seen in previous reorganisations and restructuring an increase in the incidence of parishing, revitalising that most local form of democracy. For example, in Wiltshire, Salisbury became a town council as part of that process. We are seeing similar moves towards parishing in other areas, such as Suffolk, which is currently in the process of a district merger. The Government also have powers to confer charter trustees as part of any reorganisation.

John Howell: I agree that proposals will never get unanimous support from councils, but that is not the issue. In many cases when a unitary council has been created, parish councils have not even been asked. If we are to put the emphasis on parish councils as the basic building blocks of local government, they need to be asked and they need to be included in the decision-making process.

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. If a local area tries to demonstrate to the Government that it has a good deal of local support from every possible sector in the local area, parish councils would clearly be a set of institutions that it would be worth considering talking to. Indeed, previous proposals that we have received have specifically engaged parish councils as part of their deliberations. The charter trustee status that I mentioned also means that ancient civic traditions can be retained in an area, regardless of the final form of the restructuring that takes place.

James Heapey: I am keen to understand exactly what level of support is required among local authorities. If all or most districts involved in the proposal were against it, would that be sufficient to block whatever plans might come forward?

Rishi Sunak: I am afraid I cannot give my hon. Friend a specific quantitative mechanism or definition that needs to be met. I re-emphasise the guidance,

which states that a good deal of local support is needed. I have tried my best to elaborate on how that will be interpreted by the Secretary of State when he considers proposals in the round, along with all the other criteria that he has to balance.

I am keen to give my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset a minute or two to wind up the debate, so in conclusion—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. In a half-hour debate, Ministers do not have the prerogative to give the Member who brought the debate time to wind up. The Minister has almost four minutes to go.

Rishi Sunak: Thank you, Mr Hollobone. I was not aware of that; I appreciate the extra time.

It is important that the councils of Somerset think long and hard about how best to serve their communities and about how to deliver the public services that people rely on, whether adult social care, children's services, strategic planning or transport. It may well be that innovation and re-organisation will help to deliver for the people of Somerset, but it is crucial to note that that decision should be taken by the people of Somerset themselves. It will not be for the Government to impose a top-down solution.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I will be very brief; I promise I will not wind up the debate, Mr Hollobone. I am confused, because the Minister says that there must be local involvement, but also that local stakeholders must support the proposals. Most of West Somerset's local stakeholders are not based in the county, funnily enough. Ambulance services are based in Devon, the fire brigade is based in, I think, North Somerset and the police are up in Avon. I would love to know how that will work. I ask the Minister to think this through. The most important people are the 500,000 based in the county of Somerset.

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and he is absolutely right to demonstrate that local people should have their say and that their voice should be heard. However, it is also important, when these deliberations are made, that we consider effective local government as one of the criteria. In any local area, there will be institutions and stakeholders, who may or may not be based in that area, who will make a difference to the delivery of local services, and their views will form part of those deliberations.

My hon. Friend started the debate by saying something that I wholeheartedly agree with: local government matters. I take that very seriously, as I know does the Secretary of State. That is why the Government will remain committed to responding and listening to proposals that come forward from local government. We will not seek to impose our view, but where there is a desire and a thrust for more change and innovation—whether in Somerset or elsewhere—we will look to support those involved, according to the criteria I have laid out. In conclusion, I commend my hon. Friend for the continued passion he has shown in ensuring that local democracy in Somerset remains vibrant and strong.

Question put and agreed to.

Christians Overseas

4.30 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Will those not staying to discuss the persecution of Christians please be kind enough to leave the Chamber quickly and quietly? Let me say right at the start that this is an hour-long debate and an awful lot of hon. Members wish to speak. Depending on how long the mover of the motion speaks for, it is likely that other contributions will have to be limited to two minutes or less.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of the persecution of Christians overseas.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. Given the amount of interest from colleagues, I will keep my remarks as short as possible in order for them to have the maximum amount of time to speak.

In April last year, a young Nigerian woman, Dorkas Zakka, was murdered, along with 12 others in Kafanchan, simply for attending an Easter mass. Local priest Father Alexander Yeycock said that Nigerian military units stood by and did nothing while the murders took place.

Last November in Mina, Egypt, a mob surrounded a Coptic church, threatening worshippers inside, many of whom were also physically attacked. Local Coptic leader Anba Macarius says that the Egyptian authorities have done nothing to bring those responsible to justice.

Asia Bibi was sentenced to death by hanging for blasphemy in Pakistan in 2010. Thankfully, that sentence has since been suspended. Two Pakistani politicians who advocated on her behalf and opposed Pakistan's blasphemy laws were assassinated.

In May last year, two churches in Sudan were destroyed on the orders of the Sudanese Government. In June last year, 33 Christian women in Eritrea were imprisoned by the Eritrean Government simply for taking part in prayer activity.

Just two weeks ago, Pakistani man Suneel Saleem was beaten to death by a group of doctors and security guards—a group of doctors, Mr Hollobone—at the Services Hospital in Lahore, Pakistan, when he protested about the anti-Christian abuse that his heavily pregnant sister had suffered at the hospital. A man was beaten to death by doctors in a hospital simply for being Christian.

In January this year, in Tamil Nadu, in southern India, a mob pursued and beat a priest and three companions outside a police station. Despite their desperate pleas for help, the police stood by and did nothing. We have heard nothing by way of condemnation of these sorts of attacks in India from Prime Minister Modi.

According to a petition presented to Parliament last year by Aid to the Church in Need, such attacks have been taking place in about 50 countries worldwide. In India alone, about 24,000 Christians were physically assaulted last year. In Iraq, the majority of the Christian and Yazidi populations have come close to being wiped out.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am very interested in what the hon. Gentleman is saying about various countries persecuting Christians. I hope he will come on to North Korea and China, which have

also been persecuting Christians; in fact, that has been going on for a long time. In Egypt, the Coptic Church has been persecuted for years and years. I hope that the Minister, when he winds up the debate, will tell us, for a change, what the British Government are going to do about it. Perhaps we should look at aid for a start.

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman pre-empts my speech in two or three regards, but as he mentions North Korea, I will say now that Aid to the Church in Need ranks North Korea as the worst country for Christians to live in. Accurate information is of course hard to obtain, but ACN estimates that at least 200,000 Christians have gone missing in North Korea since 1953. North Koreans who are found practising as Christians face arrest, torture and imprisonment, and there are worrying examples of Christians being publicly executed in North Korea.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): May I take my hon. Friend back from North Korea to Iraq and the middle east, but may I first make a general point? There are so many hon. Members present who want to speak—I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this really important debate—that I suggest he sponsor a longer debate in the future so that all of us will have a chance to speak. However, may I also invite him to praise the work of Open Doors, which has been working with the Christian communities in Iraq and Syria?

Chris Philp: I thank my hon. Friend. Perhaps we should all get together and ask for a Backbench Business debate one Thursday, when we could debate this matter more fully. Let us all, as an action, take that away to the Backbench Business Committee. I will note down who is here, so that I can get in touch after this debate.

I would specifically like to praise Open Doors. I did write its name at the top of my notes, but in my haste to get the debate started and not to take up too much time, I overlooked it. In fact, I can see sitting in the Public Gallery Rev. Sue Thomas from St John's church in Old Coulsdon, in my constituency, who I have been discussing this issue with for some time and who works with Open Doors. I thank Open Doors for its work in this field, and I specifically thank Rev. Sue Thomas.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. The Open Doors charity has found that, overall, persecution of Christians has risen for the fifth year in a row. Such persecution—indeed, persecution of any religious group—is abhorrent and unacceptable. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the UK Government must put the protection of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, at the heart of their foreign policy and use all diplomatic means available to ensure adherence to international law?

Chris Philp: I agree very strongly with the sentiments that the hon. Gentleman has expressed. I will come on to what I believe the UK Government could do in this area, or could do more of, but whatever efforts are being made at the moment, worldwide they are not enough, because as the hon. Gentleman has just pointed out, the problem of Christians being persecuted is getting worse, not better. The direction of travel is the

wrong one, and it is incumbent on those of us in the United Kingdom and other countries who have or can have influence to do a lot more than we are doing at the moment. We need to reverse the trend.

There are many examples of where the trend is getting worse. We all know about the activities of Boko Haram in Nigeria, where 276 Christian schoolgirls were kidnapped several years ago; 112 of them are still missing. In Myanmar, where Rohingya Muslims have been persecuted, Christian converts have been persecuted as well. About 100,000 Christians are living in displacement camps as a result.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate. Actually, there was a bid to the Backbench Business Committee for a wider debate, but unfortunately it was rejected—we should try again. He has just mentioned the Chibok girls. May I, through him, remind colleagues of early-day motion 1246 about the plight of one particular girl, who had to spend her 15th birthday still in captivity because she is refusing to renounce her faith? If all colleagues were willing to sign that early-day motion, that would be very helpful.

Chris Philp: My right hon. Friend raises a very important issue and draws attention to a very important early-day motion. So many Christians subjected to this sort of persecution show tremendous faith and tremendous bravery by standing up for their faith in the face of the most appalling threats. The example that my right hon. Friend cites is truly inspiring and tells us how seriously we must take our duty to protect girls such as the one to whom she refers. They deserve all the support and protection that we can possibly give them.

I deliberately chose the examples that I gave earlier because in all of them a Government—a nation state's Government—failed to take action to protect Christians being persecuted, whether it was those army units in Nigeria standing by and doing nothing, the police in Egypt and India standing by and doing nothing or, in the example from Sudan, the Government themselves imprisoning Christians.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I, too, congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He is itemising the huge displacement that there has been. Does he agree that, in relation to the middle east alone, we are talking about unprecedented movements of Christians out of their historical homelands, and we really need to address that problem?

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman is quite right. I have been raising individual cases, because they tell a painful and powerful story, but behind those individual cases lie hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Christians being persecuted and displaced, particularly in the middle east. We cannot stand by or walk by on the other side. We must take action.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this important debate. I was reminded that when I was the parliamentary churchwarden for St Margaret's, we did some good work trying to engage the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to get an interface with some of these

countries where we are not getting through. Could we be optimistic and get something moving back on that kind of track?

Chris Philp: I hope we can. The hon. Gentleman is driving at the point I was just beginning to make. We understand that there are terrorist organisations, such as ISIS, that do terrible things, and we are quite rightly combating them. However, I chose the examples I did very specifically, because in those examples, Governments of nation states—some of them Commonwealth members, and some of them allies of the United Kingdom—have either stood by and done nothing or, in some cases, actively encouraged and facilitated the persecution I have been describing. It is unacceptable that allies of the United Kingdom should stand by and allow this kind of persecution to take place. As a powerful western nation, we have levers at our disposal to influence these countries that are allowing the persecution of Christians to take place under their nose—and knowingly, deliberately and intentionally doing nothing.

The most obvious lever that we have was referred to by the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), namely the overseas aid budget. It is a good thing that we spend £13 billion a year on overseas aid, which is 0.7% of GDP. That gives us enormous influence. Much of that aid is spent bilaterally. It goes directly to countries rather than via third-party agencies such as the United Nations or the European Union. I believe we should use the power that aid donation confers to achieve the change we want to see.

For example, the largest bilateral recipient of overseas aid is Pakistan, which receives about £350 million a year. Yet, Christians there are persecuted terribly with violent acts. The court system in Pakistan often prosecutes Christians using blasphemy laws, which are wholly contrary to any notion of free speech or religious freedom. I believe we should be looking at imposing some conditionality, particularly on aid we give directly to another Government. We should ask that they do more and not just pay lip service and say fine words, which generally speaking they do, but that they take real action to prevent the persecution of Christians, whether it is in the court system, or through the police and other armed forces standing by and doing nothing.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree, on a more positive side, that we need to expect the Department for International Development to take far more account of the work that Christian and other faith-based organisations do? It does not take enough account of the strength of the work that those organisations do in development on behalf of the people of that country. My right hon. Friend the Minister has been an exception to that in his role in the Foreign Office, but that needs to spread to DFID, which cannot be a religion-free zone.

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend is quite right. Christian charities and organisations often show enormous courage in going into areas where Governments and the UN fear to tread, and they do work protecting Christians who are not being protected by anybody else. I endorse my hon. Friend's point, and I hope the Minister will specifically reply to it in his remarks.

[Chris Philp]

I am clear that we should be using the overseas aid budget as a means to influence behaviour by sovereign Governments. In this country we offer full religious freedom, quite rightly, regardless of faith, to everybody. I am proud that we do, but in return we should be demanding that Christians and people of any faith around the world receive precisely the same religious freedom. Where that religious freedom is not extended by unenlightened Governments, we should be doing everything to change that.

We allow some countries, for example in the middle east, to send quite large amounts of money into this country to promote their domestic faith, which is fine, and we are happy to let that happen, but at the same time, those very same Governments that are sending money here are denying religious freedom over there. That is fundamentally unfair, and it should end.

I am conscious that time is pressing on, so I want to conclude. There are two reasons why I believe this issue should be at the top of our foreign policy and overseas aid agenda, and why we need more than warm words from some of these overseas Governments. There is a human rights dimension. Religious freedom is a fundamental human right. There is a human tragedy, in that individual Christians are being persecuted in the most appalling ways, as I described in the examples I gave. I also believe that it serves our national interest to see human rights promoted, because if we help these countries become more tolerant—if we help human rights take root—that will in itself combat extremism. Where there is tolerance and respect, extremism will not flourish. There is an overwhelming human rights case for pushing this agenda hard and properly, and there is a national interest argument as well.

I know that lots of hon. Members want to speak, so I will conclude now. This is an important issue and one we all feel strongly about. I look forward to the Minister's response.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Would all those seeking to catch my eye please stand? I have to call the Front-Bench speakers at 5.7 pm. There are 12 Members standing, and there are 20 minutes left, so the time limit will have to be 90 seconds. It is amazing what you can say in 90 seconds, so I expect some powerful speeches. If there are loads of interventions, I am afraid that those at the back of the queue will not be able to contribute.

4.46 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) for bringing this important debate. He so eloquently put forward the argument about the persecution of Christians. We have clearly seen a considerable increase in attacks by armed Fulani herdsmen on predominantly Christian farming communities in northern Nigeria. To get an understanding of the scale of these attacks in the past three years, I note that the Fulani herdsmen, armed with AK47s and in some cases chemicals, are believed to have killed more men, women and children than Boko Haram.

Egypt is home to the middle east's largest Christian community—comprising some 10% of the population—the majority of whom are orthodox. The spread of ISIS-affiliated groups in the country has seen a significant rise in their persecution. In February 2017, the group released a propaganda video vowing to wipe out Egypt's Coptic community and this followed the killing of 28 Christians by a suicide bomber in the Coptic Orthodox cathedral of St Mark in Cairo, in December 2016. Last year, two church bombings killed 49 people and another 29 were killed when extremists attacked people travelling to a monastery in May.

Given the time constraints, I will conclude by reminding the Minister that in 2017, in its report on human rights, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office stated that freedom of religion and belief was now considered

“a key and integral part of the work”

of the UK Government and one of three areas that the Government would be prioritising. I urge the Minister to ensure the Government stand by that commitment.

4.48 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I would like to speak with particular reference to China. A recent hearing of the Conservative party human rights commission, which I chair, heard—as the Aid to the Church in Need report, which has already been referred to, says—that persecution in China has notably increased recently.

There are 127 million Chinese Christians, yet we have heard that, partly as a result of the revival of Christianity in China, the Chinese authorities are now cracking down even more strongly than previously, not just on the unregistered churches, where we have heard that thousands have been pulled down, crosses have been pulled down and clergy have been routinely detained, but now on registered churches and even house churches, the small churches where groups have met legitimately. Officials are going into those homes, removing any Christian items and replacing them with a picture of the Premier.

This spring, new laws were implemented to prevent certain groups of people from going to church in China, including people in certain types of employment, and even—quite shockingly—to prevent the taking of a person under 18 to church. Increasingly, apart from the imprisonment of the clergy, the human rights lawyers, who used to be able to defend the clergy from unreasonable accusations, have also been imprisoned. I understand that it is now virtually impossible to find such a lawyer in China—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order.

4.50 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for the opportunity speak. I congratulate the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) on introducing the debate. I welcome the Minister and look forward to his important response. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, many things come to my attention. In Nepal, the new anti-conversion and blasphemy laws threaten Christians. In Nigeria, Christian farmers and

others have been murdered in their thousands by the armed Fulani militias. In Pakistan, at least 1,000 Hindu and Christian girls are kidnapped, forced to convert, forcibly married or sold into prostitution annually.

I would like to leave something for the Minister to do in these 90 seconds—it is a bit like that radio programme “Just a Minute”. He should develop strategies to advance freedom of religion or belief in countries with severe FORB restrictions; develop a database that tracks quantitative data on issues relating to religious or belief minorities; increase Government expertise internally or via external experts; and introduce mandatory training for employees of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development who work in countries with severe levels of discrimination against religion or belief.

Those steps will address the persecution of Christians. This year, 100,000 people will die for their faith, 200 million will be persecuted and 2 billion will live in an endangered neighbourhood. When we put those figures into perspective, we know why this debate is so important. That is why I am very happy to support the hon. Member for Croydon South.

4.52 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) on securing this debate. In the brief time I have available, I will compliment Open Doors on its work.

The necessity for this debate is shown by an attack on the Emmanuel Christian College, which Open Doors has been supporting, that took place on 14 May in South Sudan, where 10 people, including five children, were killed. Although the details are unclear, witnesses blame the Sudan People’s Liberation Army. That is a sad reminder of the risks people face to do what many of us take for granted in our daily lives, which is to declare our Christian faith, to go to church and to wish to share that faith with others.

This is not just about the state actors—the traditional idea of a Government oppressing their people—but the non-state actors, such as Daesh, which have brought so much terror to the middle east and, in particular, to Christian families there. In the Minister’s response, I am interested to hear what work he plans to do with Governments who we want to change their policies to allow more religious freedom and to support Governments who are genuinely struggling to deal with extremist elements within their nation states that cannot be dealt with by normal law enforcement mechanisms.

The key part is about stopping the persecution not just of Christians, but of people who freely choose which faith they have, or who have no faith. All Christians should stand for that fundamental right.

4.53 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp). I will be brief and talk about one person in China: Gao Zhisheng, a prominent Chinese human rights lawyer who is best known for his work defending Christians, Falun Gong adherents and other vulnerable social groups. He is believed to have been forcibly disappeared by the

authorities since August as a result of his work on sensitive cases and his open letters to Chinese political leaders.

Gao was detained and tortured numerous times before being convicted of inciting to subvert state power. He was sentenced to three years in prison and was released on 7 August 2014 with serious health problems. He was disappeared again in August and I met his daughter not long after being elected.

My only ask is that the Minister makes direct representations to the Chinese authorities to revise all regulations and legislation pertaining to religion to ensure that they align with international standards on freedom of religion or belief, as set out in article 18 of the international covenant on civil and political rights, in consultation with religious communities and legal experts. That is my ask. The Minister should get on with it.

4.54 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I place on record my huge respect for people of all faiths who are persecuted around the world for their faith and, in the context of this debate, particularly for Christians who face horrific circumstances that we in this country can only imagine. We honour their dignity and courage.

Persecution is not always about violence and killing people. It often takes more subtle forms where Christians and people of other faiths are excluded from certain parts of society and from obtaining certain jobs—in some countries they cannot work in the public sector—and are perhaps put under surveillance. We should be conscious of all forms of persecution that Christians face around the world, not just the most extreme.

To echo other hon. Members, our Government should do more to use the influence they have, particularly through the Commonwealth and our overseas aid budget, to ensure that the rights and freedoms of Christians around the world are protected and to challenge countries where that is not the case. Like other hon. Members, I place on record my huge respect for Open Doors and the incredible work that it has done over decades to raise the issue of the persecuted Church around the world and to support persecuted Christians. It is a sad reality that despite the organisation existing for more than 50 years, its work is more needed in our world today than ever before. We should support everything that it and others do to support the persecuted Church.

4.57 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): Given the time constraints, I will focus on the Coptic Orthodox Church. In Islwyn, St Mary’s and St Abu Saifain’s Coptic Orthodox church is the first in Wales, and hundreds of people from across Wales go to worship there every year. I was lucky to be invited when my son, Zachariah, was three weeks old. I went with my wife and we celebrated our first mass with the Copts there. We were so welcomed.

Although Coptic Christians in my constituency and across the UK can freely worship without persecution for their beliefs, the same cannot be said for those in Egypt and elsewhere. Many will remember that a Coptic church just south of Cairo was targeted in a horrific

[Chris Evans]

terror attack in December, which took the lives of 10 people, including the perpetrator. That same day, an electronics shop owned by Copts in nearby Helwan was also attacked, leaving another two people dead. The Egyptian Interior Ministry confirmed that those attacks were by Daesh.

Estimates vary as to how many Copts there are worldwide, but it is believed that there are up to 20 million. Of those, at least 15 million reside in Egypt. That makes Copts a minority in Egypt's population of 95 million, the majority of whom follow Islam, which is recognised as the state religion. There have been many examples of Copts, especially women and girls, being kidnapped, forced to marry and converted. That needs to stop. I agree with hon. Members who have said that where Governments are struggling to keep a lid on extremism and protect Christians, we must do all we can to help them in word and deed.

4.58 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. The largest Christian community in Africa is in Nigeria, a country for which I am the Prime Minister's trade envoy.

The centre and south of Nigeria are tolerant places where faiths live side by side in happiness. The problem comes in the north and north-east of the country, where there is a great deal of radical Islamism. Christians are caught in the crossfire there between ethnic or illegal groups as they pursue their vendettas against other groups.

Nigeria did not stand by, however, after an attack on a Christian church. The President was summoned to Parliament and he condemned the attack in the strongest possible language. The Parliament suspended its sittings for three days. Before it did that, it passed a no-confidence motion in the security chiefs. That is a strong indication of the feeling across the whole of Nigeria—we should not forget that the President is a member of the Islamic faith—that the attack on the church was not to be tolerated.

4.59 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for calling me to speak. I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) for securing this important debate.

Earlier this month, I had the privilege to meet the Reverend Yunusa Nmadu, the chief executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide Nigeria and general secretary of the Evangelical Church Winning All, who gave me an insight into the awful situation facing Christians in Nigeria, particularly in the north of the country. I was told of the worrying rise in the number of young Christian schoolgirls being abducted and then subjected to forced conversion and forced marriage. I heard about Leah Sharibu, the sole Christian among the Dapchi girls abducted by Boko Haram on 29 February, who remains in captivity.

The rise in attacks by the Fulani militia was also highlighted to me. It is reported that since 2011 such attacks have displaced some 62,000 people and left 6,000 dead and many more injured, in what observers

have described as some form of ethnic cleansing. In the same timeframe, the Fulani herdsmen have destroyed some 500 churches in Benue state alone.

I trust that the Minister will be able to use this Government's influence to encourage the Government of Nigeria to meet their constitutional and international obligations to uphold freedom of religion and belief for all citizens. The examples that I have highlighted just touch on the issues in Nigeria, but there is certainly a great need to press the Nigerian Government to overhaul their existing security arrangements, so as to protect vulnerable communities from the threat posed by the Fulani militia.

I hope that the UK Government are able to raise those concerns, and that the Minister will join me in urging Nigeria to tackle the proliferation of small arms and to address the violence caused by the armed bandits and the Fulani herdsmen, among others.

5 pm

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for chairing this crucial debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) for securing it.

Sadly, persecution of individuals due to their religious belief is nothing new. However, there is no doubt that communities of Christians that might once have expected to live in peace now face new threats that go hand in hand with rising political violence, attacks on free speech and discriminatory law making in countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan and Indonesia. The Minister will be aware of the appalling attacks that took place this month on churches in Surabaya.

What can we do? I know that the Minister has been developing a strong relationship with Indonesia, and I would like to know how the UK is sharing our security expertise with nations affected by Islamist terror, what work we are doing to share expertise on deradicalisation, and what engagement we have had on anti-blasphemy laws that are affecting Christian and Ahmadiyya communities.

What can we do to encourage thought leadership in regions such as the middle east? Saudi Arabia clearly wishes to rebrand itself very carefully as a more modern nation, in part to satisfy a growing demand for change from its young and vibrant population but also to diversify its economy. How can we harness that drive and carefully encourage the kingdom towards a more moderate approach, which other nations might be inclined to follow? I would be interested to hear the Minister's thoughts on that.

It has been mentioned before, but we also have leverage through our aid budget, with some £350 million going to Pakistan alone each year. Understandably, that development package is highly controversial among many of my constituents, but in so far as the Government wish to continue that aid relationship I agree with other Members that it ought to be conditional.

5.2 pm

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): This issue is an extremely important one, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) on securing the debate.

It is shocking that more than 2 million Christians around the world are persecuted simply because of their faith, and like many hon. Members today I commend the work of Open Doors. What stood out for me on its world watch list was the fact that many of the countries on the list are also synonymous with luxury holidays, such as the Maldives and Mexico.

We need to talk more about this issue and not be afraid to talk about it. We are traditionally still a Christian country, and this issue does not necessarily get the airtime that it deserves. We have leverage with our international aid budget, enabling us to push countries to do more and to stop persecuting people simply because of their faith. We should also ring-fence a proportion of our international aid specifically to address this issue, because it is so important. In addition, I want us to ensure that our aid does not have unintended consequences, whereby we try to further causes such as education but actually make the problem worse.

I also note the work of SAT-7 in my constituency of Chippenham. It is a broadcaster across the middle east and Africa that tries to promote Christian values but also tolerance of and respect for all religions, which we all want to see. Also, I echo the comments made earlier about SAT-7 being unable to get donations from the Department for International Development just because of its religious background.

5.3 pm

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone—thank you for calling me to speak, given that I have already made an intervention.

I return to what is happening in Nigeria. The 2018 world watch list names Nigeria as the country with the largest number of Christians who have been killed, at 3,000. In fact, 6,000 people in Nigeria have been killed by the radicalised Fulani herdsmen since 2011. Can the Minister give us some assurances that the Government will examine the spread of such terrorism into the centre and south of Nigeria, since those parts of Nigeria have ceased to be the focus of the Department for International Development's responsibility? Nigeria is a vast country that lies on a fault line between Islam and Christianity. There should be very real concern in our country about Nigeria, which, after all, is a Commonwealth country upon which we should be able to bring some pressure to bear.

Will the Minister also come back to the question that I asked in my intervention about what the Government are doing to get the last of the Chibok girls freed? These poor girls have slipped all too easily from the attention of the media around the world, and to think that a girl had to spend her 15th birthday in captivity just because of her unwillingness to give up her most profound belief shocks me to the core. I hope that by having this debate we can do something to ensure that those girls are not forgotten.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench speeches. The guideline limits are five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty's Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. Then Mr Philp will have the time remaining at the end to sum up the debate.

5.5 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) on securing this very important debate. He made a powerful speech, which at times highlighted very disturbing, even harrowing cases from across the world, and he talked about the fundamental human rights that are jeopardised when people are not free to practise their religion.

As Christians in the UK, we can be subject to verbal abuse, but nobody ever prevents us from practising our religion. We have had many contributions this afternoon, and I will mention some of them. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) talked about the rise of ISIS and the difficulties that presented for the Christian community. The hon. Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) both talked about the Christian community in China and the fact that 127 million Christians in that country are in great danger. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) and the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) all talked about the Christian community in Nigeria. In fact, Nigeria is one of the countries where Christians face the greatest degree of persecution.

A number of Members have mentioned the Open Doors world watch list, and I will just highlight some of the countries on it. No. 1 on that list is North Korea, where persecution is led by the state, which sees Christians as hostile elements that have to be eradicated. Neighbours and family members, including children, are highly watchful and suspicious, and will report anything to the authorities. If Christians are discovered, they are either deported to labour camps or killed on the spot, and their families suffer the same fate. Meetings for worship are virtually impossible to arrange and so are conducted in the utmost secrecy. The churches in Pyongyang that are shown to visitors serve mere propaganda purposes.

In Somalia, family members and clan leaders intimidate and even kill converts to Christianity. Al-Shabaab, the radical militant group, relies on a clan-based structure to advance its ideology, forcing sheikhs and imams to teach jihad or face expulsion or death, so it is not only Christians who are targeted in Somalia but Muslims too. Christians from a Muslim background in Somalia are regarded as high-value targets, and at least 23 suspected converts were killed last year.

In Sudan, there is a complex cultural mix, but the Government are implementing a policy of one religion, one culture and one language. Under that authoritarian rule, freedom of expression is curtailed and the persecution of Christians is reminiscent of ethnic cleansing. Some Christians disguise their faith, even from their children and even after death, preferring to be buried in a Muslim cemetery rather than a Christian one.

In Pakistan, Christians suffer from institutionalised discrimination, with occupations that are regarded as low and dirty being officially reserved for Christians. I want to highlight the work of a Glasgow-based organisation called Global Minorities Alliance, which has produced a number of reports. Some of its staff travelled to Thailand to see some of the Pakistani Christians who had travelled to that country. What they found was that

[Carol Monaghan]

Christians fleeing Pakistan can easily gain access to Thailand, because of Thailand's loose tourist visa regime, but Thailand is no safe haven for them. Once they are in Thailand, they are in a country that refuses to recognise their status as refugees and they find themselves in limbo, unable to go back to Pakistan and unable to start a new life. Daily life has become an economic hardship, coupled with the fear of arrest, detention and deportation.

Finally, I want to mention three countries that target Christians, all of which we have links with—Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey. We sell arms to Saudi Arabia at the same time as it targets Christians. The hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) mentioned tourism links. We have strong tourism links with Egypt and Turkey, yet their persecution continues, so we need to think carefully about our trade deals and our relationships when considering paying into economies through tourism.

5.10 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) on his powerful speech on an important subject.

Christianity has been dominant in this country for 1,000 years and, for us, it can be difficult to imagine what it is like to be the persecuted. We tend to think of the persecutions of the first century or of the Tudor TV dramas, but the scale of what hon. Members on both sides of the House have described shows that persecution is a large and growing problem. I want to say something about some particular countries, but we need to ask ourselves why this is happening before we can discuss what we need to do.

Hon. Members have spoken about the middle east. Between 50% and 80% of Christians in Syria and Iraq have been forced to move in recent years, according to Open Doors. I, too, commend that organisation's excellent work in supporting those communities and in bringing the significant problems to our attention. I also commend the work of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, which came to see me recently.

Many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), talked about the problems in Nigeria, which are particularly concentrated in the north of the country and which have grown recently. My husband was born in Kaduna and his father, who had been a colonial civil servant, died in 2004. At that time, the persecution was a small cloud on the horizon, not the big problem it is today. We need to do more. It is, of course, not easy, and we cannot just go around threatening people, but we need to pay more attention to the problem, as we do to the oldest Christian community, the Copts, whom my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) talked about, and their particular need for protection.

As hon. Members have said, the persecution takes different forms. In some places it is about a religious divide. In some places it is state-driven oppression, particularly in China. In some places it is about people being excluded, and that is what we see in Mexico where, for example, someone in the wrong denomination might have their water and electricity cut off—shocking things, which I will raise when I am in Mexico next week.

It is hard for us to understand why people feel that they are under threat from other religions, that what other religions do threatens their position, or that they are so entitled, and so confident in their own rightness, that they should impose their views on other people. It is important that we increase and improve religious understanding. The Minister probably knows that there is a very good centre for religious understanding at the London School of Economics and Political Science, led by Rev. James Walters. We also need to consider how we can use our aid money. We need to think more openly about what misunderstandings we have, as well as about those of other people, without in any way saying that any of the abuses are acceptable.

In Vietnam, there are arrests, imprisonments, torture and extrajudicial killings, yet the Home Office wants to send a constituent of mine, who is a Christian, back there. When I asked the Bishop of Durham for examples he knew of persecution, he raised that of a Jordanian Christian woman who came to this country and was then interned in Yarl's Wood before she claimed asylum. We need to use the aid programme and we need to speak out, but will Foreign Office Ministers please also talk to the Home Office so that the very people who have been victims are not re-victimised in this country?

5.15 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) for initiating the debate. I particularly respect his consistent and long-standing commitment—well, long-standing for a colleague of three years, anyway—to the issue during all his time in the House. He and other hon. Members from across the House have given appalling examples of the persecution of Christians overseas. I fear that I will not be able to do justice in the relatively short time available to their heartfelt contributions, but I will, if necessary, write to those whose issues I am unable to address in these few words.

I thank the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman). She made a very good point. I am a great believer in joined-up government. Sometimes I fear that, between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Home Office, things are not quite as joined up as they should be on these sorts of matters, and I will do my level best to take up the hon. Lady's case and address it more avidly, if she will give me the details.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): While we are on the subject of joined-up government, will my right hon. Friend use his good offices to seek to ensure that, when Christian clerics are invited to the United Kingdom on religious visits, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Home Office will facilitate visas rather than blocking them?

Mark Field: No doubt I will have the specifics of that matter before too long. Yes, I will endeavour to do that for my hon. Friend.

The Government are, sadly, all too familiar with research conducted in recent years by reputable organisations that shows that the persecution of Christians is on the rise. In the 12 months to October, Open Doors concluded that more than 200 million Christians in 50 countries experienced what it regards as a high level

of persecution. Its latest watch list charts a swathe of Christian persecution stretching from northern and western Africa to North Korea.

I should at this point like to touch on the situation in Nigeria—an issue that a number of Members expressed concern about. In addition to the challenges presented by Boko Haram, particularly in the north and on the north-eastern border with Cameroon, Nigeria faces daily violence in its central regions between Christian farmers and predominantly Muslim Fulani cattle herders. That cycle of violent clashes has resulted in countless deaths, particularly in recent years, and even in the destruction of entire villages, which we of course condemn.

I fully understand the concerns that have been raised. I should stress that this is a long-running conflict with complex causes, including land, farming rights, grazing routes and access to water, as well as the religious divisions referred to. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), I warmly welcome President Buhari's engagement on the issue. It is imperative that the Nigerian Government and the military work together with the affected populations to bring perpetrators to justice and develop a solution that meets the needs of all the communities affected, as British officials will continue to encourage them to do.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) wanted some reassurance. The Foreign Secretary spoke to the Nigerian vice-president following the abductions of the Dapchi, and the Prime Minister herself, during the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, raised these issues with President Buhari on 16 April. Our view is that the attacks on schools must stop. My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden is right, unfortunately, that the terrible events in the north-east of the country and the abductions—still—of over 100 schoolgirls have disappeared from the media, and this is an opportunity to raise the issue, as we will do in Abuja and beyond.

Returning to the broader theme, Christian persecution takes many forms. As we have heard, places of worship in far too many countries are targeted, shut down or even destroyed. Followers are discriminated against, subjected to mob attack and criminalised—in some cases, by the state. Many live in fear for their lives, and many thousands have been forced to flee their homes.

In whatever form it manifests itself, all religious persecution is abhorrent and deplorable. Governments, religious groups and right-minded people must do all they can to bring it to an end. I am glad that point was raised by a number of Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Torbay (Kevin Foster) and for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), among others.

In our work around the globe, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will stand up for religious freedom—full stop. We do not do that simply for Christians; indeed, one has to recognise that for us to stand up exclusively for Christians would risk protecting a minority perhaps close to many western hearts to the exclusion of others or would, indeed, risk making them more vulnerable.

I assure Members—I saw this in my most recent visit—that we do our best to recognise that the persecution of Christians has become much more profound in particular parts of the world, not least China. I hope to come back to the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) later.

Fiona Bruce: The Minister talks about bringing perpetrators to justice. Two years ago in a debate in this House, Parliament voted by 278 Members to nil to call on the Government to take action to hold to account the perpetrators of genocide against Christians, Yazidis and others in Syria and Iraq. Will he say what action has been taken since then, or perhaps write to us? In his response then, the Minister's colleague said that the UK is taking an international lead on the issue. Will the Minister meet Lord Alton and me to discuss the genocide determination Bills we have introduced in our respective Houses? They would go some way to addressing the issue.

Mark Field: I will meet my hon. Friend. If she will excuse me, I will write to her with some of the details she has asked for.

We believe that religious freedom is a bellwether of broader individual freedoms, democratic health and, ultimately, economic health. For all those reasons, it is a priority for this Government to defend and promote the rights of not only Christians but peoples of all faiths and none so that they can practise their faith or belief without fear or discrimination.

I could say much—time is running tight—about aspects of the bilateral work we do. Earlier this month, I visited Nepal. I expressed concern to Prime Minister Oli in a meeting I had with him that uncertainty around provisions of the new penal code might be used to limit the freedom to adopt, change or practise a religion. Those provisions can especially target Christian minorities. I also raised concerns about freedom of religion or belief and about the protection of minority religious communities in Pakistan with the Ministry of Human Rights during my visit to that country in November.

Needless to say, we will continue to raise concerns with the authorities in China at our annual UK-China human rights dialogue and on other occasions about the increasingly worrying and widespread persecution of Christian minorities—particularly those converting from other religions. Our values form an integral part of our relationship with China; indeed, the Prime Minister raised human rights issues when she met President Xi and Prime Minister Li earlier this year.

Chris Philp: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Field: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I only have a small amount of time left.

So far this year my ministerial colleagues have raised issues about freedom of religion or belief with counterparts in such places as Iraq, Egypt and Burma. My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) mentioned Indonesia. We have made representations to the Indonesian Government to ensure that the proposed blasphemy laws are not applied on their current rather discriminatory basis. I will be going to that country for four days in August and will raise those issues then. My hon. Friend will appreciate the strong intelligence and security relationship we have with Indonesia. That is not in any way to forgive any of these issues, but we have important intelligence relationships, not least because of the global threat, particularly in Mindanao, which is just the other side of the Philippine border.

It is not just about Government-to-Government work. I could say much about NGO and project work, but I think it would be worth while to focus the end of my

[Mark Field]

comments on issues around aid conditionality that have been brought up by a number of Members—particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy). It is important to state that the Department for International Development has its own faith-based principles that provide a framework for engaging faith partners in development. It also wants to actively support faith-based NGOs to apply to the UK Aid Connect fund, which is a funding pot for smaller NGOs.

In addition to our discussions with Governments, it has been suggested that UK overseas aid should be entirely conditional on recipient Governments taking concrete action to end religious persecution. I reassure the House that we challenge our development partners precisely and specifically on these issues, in whichever country they arise. There may be countries where we disapprove of what they are doing.

This is a non-religious issue, but in Cambodia we have had opposition leaders being locked up. However, equally, we have long-standing relationships in aid and development terms, particularly in mine clearance in parts of that country. The interests of some of the most vulnerable are at stake. If we do not clear those mines, arable land will not be able to be used. While it is right that these things are conditional and that guidelines are set down, we equally have to recognise that we are sometimes acting for the most vulnerable with a range of aid programmes. Simply to cut off that money mid-flow would not be the right way forward.

Generally, DFID will assess a country's commitment to each of the four partnership principles. One of those is a commitment to human rights, which includes freedom of religion or belief. Evidence of a lack of commitment to the principles influences decisions on how much aid is given and in what manner it is passed out. For example, it might mean that aid is provided through civil society organisations, rather than Government bodies. Our aim is to support projects that can stimulate positive change in the countries concerned, such as our project to help secondary school teachers promote religious freedom in classrooms across parts of north Africa.

The hon. Member for Croydon South specifically mentioned Pakistan. As I have said, Ministers have raised concerns with the Government in Islamabad this year. We are doing a great deal of work through our projects to try to benefit religious minorities in Pakistan. Last year, for example, we had an £800,000 FCO project to counter hate speech and a £200,000 project to celebrate Pakistan's religious diversity.

We should all be proud of the life-saving impact of our overseas aid on persecuted religious groups. While we do not allocate humanitarian support to them specifically—because we believe it could be counterproductive—our policy of prioritising those most in need means such groups are often the beneficiaries.

I share many of the concerns that have been raised by other Members. The situation is desperate in Iraq and Syria. Some 1.5 million Christians lived in Iraq as recently as 2003. It is understood that fewer than a

quarter of a million now remain. Likewise, in Syria, huge numbers of Christians are now in refugee camps in Lebanon or have fled the country. Very few, I suspect, will feel it is safe to return any time soon.

In conclusion, I thank Members for all their contributions. I fear that a 90-second speaking limit does not do anything like justice to the passion they all feel. Less is more sometimes, but not always in every parliamentary debate I have been part of. As a Government, we will continue to defend the fundamental right of religious freedom, not least because of our commitment to the universal declaration on human rights. I very much hope that other Members will have a chance to speak at much greater length. I will endeavour to look through this debate in *Hansard* and reply individually to each Member whose points I was not able to pick up in this contribution.

5.28 pm

Chris Philp: I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who have spoken in this afternoon's debate. It was a great shame that time was so constrained. I have noted down everyone who was present, and I will follow up and try to organise a proper full-day Backbench Business debate on this important topic at the earliest opportunity.

This debate shows there is cross-party support for pursuing the issue. I think every major party was represented in today's contributions, and there is agreement around the Chamber about the need to do more, because things are getting worse, not better.

I once again thank Open Doors for its work raising this important issue. My hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) has been a Parliamentary Private Secretary in this debate, and he has done a lot of work with Open Doors, which is based in his constituency. I know he is a great friend and supporter of the Open Doors movement.

I welcome the Minister's remarks on overseas aid conditionality. I am glad he made the comments he did, but I would go a little further: no Government who are failing to take action on this issue should receive any overseas aid from this country on a Government-to-Government basis. Where there are mine clearance programmes or we are dispersing aid through charities, that work is valuable and should not be threatened, but no Government who stand by and allow this persecution to happen should receive a single penny of aid from the UK taxpayer.

Religious freedom, whether it is for Christians or any other group, is of fundamental importance. It is a fundamental human right and a mark of our civilisation as a country and as a world. We must do everything we can, and more than we are currently doing, to ensure that religious freedom is protected around the world.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of the persecution of Christians overseas.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 22 May 2018

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Clean Air Strategy

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Today, the Government published their consultation on a clean air strategy. At the most fundamental level, our health and prosperity depend on the health of the planet on which we live. From the air we breathe to the water we drink, the food we eat and the energy which powers our homes and businesses, we need to ensure we have a healthy and sustainable environment.

Nowhere is this more true than in the case of air quality. Air pollution is a major public health risk ranking alongside cancer, heart disease and obesity. It causes more harm than passive smoking.

This clean air strategy sets out the case for action and demonstrates this Government's determination to improve our air quality. Leaving the EU provides us with an excellent opportunity to be even more ambitious about achieving cleaner air for the health of the nation, and for our environment and the biodiversity it sustains. We want to do all that we can to reduce people's exposure to pollutants such as nitrogen oxides, ammonia, volatile organic compounds, particulate matter and sulphur dioxide.

Air pollution has improved since 2010, but we recognise that there is more to do. This comprehensive clean air strategy sets out how we will tackle all sources of air pollution, making our air healthier to breathe, protecting nature and boosting the economy.

Government must act to tackle air pollution which shortens lives. We are already acting to reduce concentrations of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) around roads from cars, but vehicles are not the only source of toxic emissions. Air pollution is a result of the way we currently generate power, heat our homes, produce food, manufacture consumer goods and power transport. Better, cleaner technologies and simple changes in behaviour will tackle the pollution that claims lives.

The new strategy is a key part of our 25-year plan to leave our environment in a better state than we found it. It sets out the comprehensive action that is required from across all parts of government and society to meet the challenge. By 2025, we will halve the number of people living in locations where concentrations of particulate matter are above the World Health Organisation guideline limit of 10 µg/m³, protecting public health.

Through the introduction of new primary legislation, we will introduce a stronger and more coherent legislative framework for action to tackle air pollution, giving local government new powers to take decisive action in areas with an air pollution problem.

We are investing £10 million in improving our modelling, data and analytical tools to give a more precise picture of current air quality and the impact of policies on it in

future. Alongside this, we will seek ways to support further investment in research and innovation, in partnership with UKRI, which will help the UK become world leaders in clean technology and secure further emissions reductions.

From farming to consumer products, a large range of other day-to-day practices, processes and products produce harmful emissions. Of particular concern is burning wood and coal to heat a home, which contributes 38% to harmful particulate matter emissions. It is why we will ensure only the cleanest fuels will be available for sale and only the cleanest stoves will be available to buy and install.

For the first time, the Government will take concerted action to tackle ammonia from farming by requiring and supporting farmers to invest in the infrastructure and equipment that will reduce emissions. The agriculture sector accounts for 88% of UK emissions of ammonia, and action by farmers can make a big difference in reducing the impacts of excess nitrogen on sensitive habitats and reducing the overall background levels of particulates in the atmosphere.

Government cannot act alone in tackling air pollution, and our strategy sets out how we will work with businesses, farmers and industry to implement lasting solutions to reduce air pollution, and the importance of each of us taking action and playing an important role in cleaning up our air for the next generation.

These actions will, we hope, ensure that this country is recognised as the leading global champion of cleaner air for the next generation.

[HCWS705]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

EU (Withdrawal) Bill: SO No. 830

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): I am today placing in the Library of the House the Department's analysis on the application of Standing Order No. 830 in respect of any motion relating to a Lords amendment for Commons consideration of Lords amendments stage for the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill.

[HCWS704]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs attended the Foreign Affairs Council on 16 April. The Council was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Luxembourg.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS COUNCIL

Syria

The Council discussed the latest developments in Syria, including the targeted US, French and British airstrikes on chemical weapons facilities. Ahead of the Brussels Conference on Syria and the region, Ministers discussed the need to relaunch a political solution to the conflict in the framework of the UN-led Geneva process. The Council adopted conclusions on Syria.

Iran

Ministers agreed on the need for unity on continuing the implementation of the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA). They encouraged the diplomatic efforts to ensure that there continues to be strong commitment to the agreement by all the parties involved. Ministers also discussed other issues outside the scope of the JCPOA, in particular the role of Iran in regional conflicts, not least in Syria and Yemen, as well as the EU's concerns at Iran's ballistic missiles programme and its human rights situation.

Russia

The Council agreed unanimously on the continued relevance of the five guiding principles that were agreed in March 2016. Following the Salisbury attack and the European Council conclusions that were agreed in March 2018, Ministers highlighted the need to strengthen the resilience of the EU and its neighbours against Russian threats, including hybrid threats such as disinformation campaigns. Ministers commended the work carried out by the East StratComms taskforce in the European External Action Service. Ministers also highlighted the importance of supporting Russian civil society and continuing to develop people-to-people contacts.

Western Balkans

Over lunch, Ministers discussed the Western Balkans in preparation for the EU-Western Balkans summit in Sofia on 17 May 2018.

External action financing instruments

The Council held a preliminary exchange of views on the future financing of external action instruments after 2020. The Commission is preparing its proposal for the EU's next long-term budget (the future multiannual financial framework, MFF).

Members agreed a number of measures without discussion:

The Council approved the annual progress report on the implementation of the EU strategy against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), which covers activities carried out in 2017;

The Council adopted conclusions on chemical disarmament and non-proliferation ahead of the Fourth Special Session of the Conference of the States Parties to review the operation of the chemical weapons convention on the prohibition of the development, production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons and on their destruction. This session will take place in The Hague on 21-30 November 2018;

The Council adopted conclusions on South Sudan;

The Council adopted conclusions on malicious cyber activities that underline the importance of a global, open, free, stable and secure cyberspace where human rights, fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law fully apply;

The Council approved the High Representative's six-monthly report on Operation Althea, which covers the period from 1 September 2017 to 28 February 2018;

The Council adopted a decision approving Mazars and KPMG S.A. as the external auditors of the Banque de France, the National Central Bank of France, for the 2018-23 period.

[HCWS707]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Suspect Vehicles: Police Pursuit

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I announced in September 2017 that the Home Office would lead a review of the legislation, guidance and practice surrounding the police's pursuits of suspect vehicles. As I said in September, this Government are determined to get ahead of and tackle emerging threats like motorcycle-related crimes, including those involving mopeds and scooters. People must be able to go about their daily lives without fear of harassment or attack and criminals must not think they can get away with a crime by riding or driving in a certain way or on a certain type of vehicle.

I am today publishing the review's findings for public consultation. The findings will be available on gov.uk and a copy will be placed in the Library of the House. The consultation sets out and seeks views on a number of proposals, including:

Judging whether a police officer's driving is careless or dangerous against the standard of a careful and competent police driver of a similar level of training and skill, rather than any careful and competent driver, as now;

Requiring that specific driving tactics employed by the police are authorised appropriately and are both necessary and proportionate to the circumstances;

Making clear that the police are not responsible for the standard of driving of a suspect being pursued; and

Clarifying the various emergency service exemptions to traffic law to reduce the potential for confusion.

I have been clear from the outset that we must ensure that the end result of these changes enables the police to do their job effectively and keep us safe while ensuring that we continue to keep our roads among the safest in the world. It is important therefore that we seek the public's views on these proposals, given their potential to affect all those who use our roads. I look forward to hearing the views of all those interested in the proposals before the consultation closes on 13 August.

[HCWS706]

JUSTICE

Prison Service Pay Review Body

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): I am pleased to announce that the Prime Minister has extended the appointment of Dr Peter Knight CBE as chair of the Prison Service Pay Review Body for the period 1 March to 31 July 2018. The extension has been made in accordance with the governance code on public appointments.

[HCWS708]

Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 22 May 2018

EDUCATION School Funding

The following is an extract from an answer given by the Minister for School Standards to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) during the Opposition day debate on 25 April 2018:

Siobhain McDonagh: The Minister is aware that I am a supporter of Labour's academisation scheme, whereby failing schools that cannot be fixed by the council became academies. The problem for my constituency and many others is that the number of good or adequate sponsors is now running out and schools are being forced to become academies, which is not always in the best interests of pupils.

Nick Gibb: I share the hon. Lady's support for Labour's academisation programme, which is why we expanded it from 200 academies to over 6,000. She is fortunate to have in her constituency the Harris Federation, which is

one of the most successful multi-academy trusts and school sponsors in the country. She should also want to acknowledge that funding for schools in Mitcham and Morden will rise by 7.3% under the national funding formula, and that Merton will receive an extra £6.3 million by 2019-20—a 5.4% increase in funding.

[Official Report, 25 April 2018, Vol. 639, c. 929.]

Letter of correction from Mr Gibb:

An error has been identified in the answer given to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on 25 April 2018.

The correct response should have been:

Nick Gibb: I share the hon. Lady's support for Labour's academisation programme, which is why we expanded it from 200 academies to over 6,000. She is fortunate to have in her constituency the Harris Federation, which is one of the most successful multi-academy trusts and school sponsors in the country. She should also want to acknowledge that funding for schools in Mitcham and Morden will rise by 7.3% under the national funding formula, and that Merton will receive an extra £6.3 million **when the national funding formula is implemented in full**—a 5.4% increase in funding.

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 22 May 2018

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